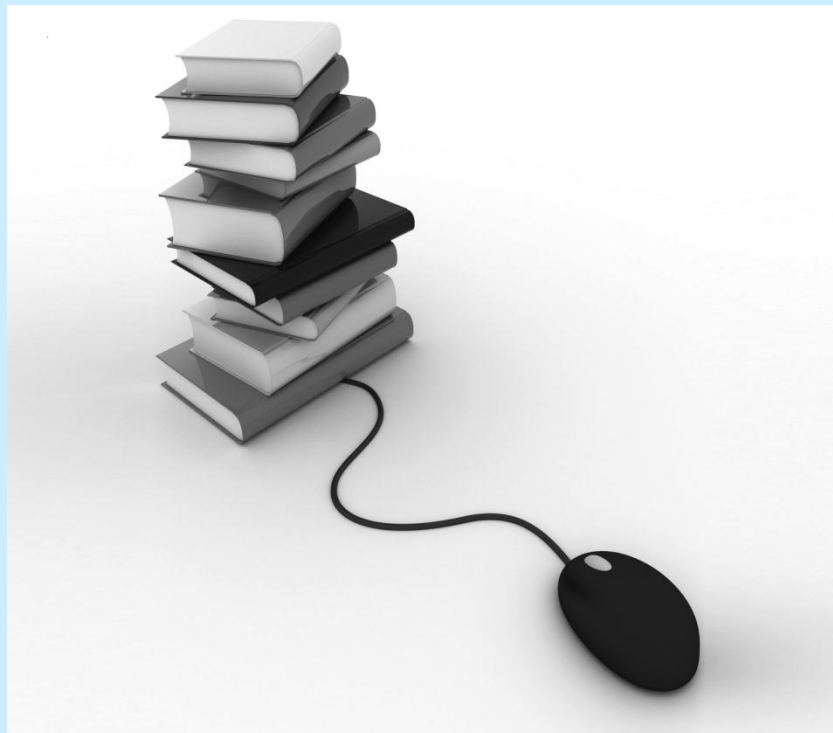# Academic Writing
Academic skills guide1

Produced by Dyslexia Support Enabling Services

View at www.soton.ac.uk/edusupport/dyslexia

Contents

Introduction

Academic writing can take many forms:

coursework essay	literature review
lab report	reflective journal
exam question	self-evaluation
case study	dissertation

An academic assignment is usually a piece of formal, extended writing. It expresses ideas or investigates and records data which are discussed, summarised, evaluated and, most importantly, backed up by evidence. The aim is to demonstrate:

- understanding of the topic
- research skills
- ability to extract relevant information from a variety of sources
- ability to learn independently

Writing is a process that includes a number of tasks. It can be difficult because ideas that form and multiply easily in your head seem to slip out of control when you try to pin them down. Two of the important tasks of academic writing are to decide what is relevant and organise your ideas into a series of points that make sense to the reader. Like a work of art, skilled writing merges ideas and structure seamlessly.

How do I start?

Whether you are given a title or have to choose your own, you need to refer to your unit/topic guidelines very closely. Ask yourself:

- How does the topic relate to my assignment?
- What are the key words?
- What are the learning outcomes?
- What are the main points to cover?
- How will I cover these ideas?
- What examples will I use?
- What will the evidence be?

Particularly important are:

- What is the word count?
- What are the marking criteria?
- How long have I got?

These last three questions will help you stay focused.

Answer the question

No one deliberately ignores the question, but it is easy to misread or misinterpret it. It is tempting to go off at a tangent and write about what you know, rather than what is asked, or simply try to include too much. To prevent this happening, **keep the question in front of you at all times**. Try rewriting it in your own words. A long question can be broken down into parts, with each part written on a separate line.

You could also separate the question words, such as 'Discuss', 'Outline', 'Compare' from the subject words to ensure you approach the topic from the right angle. See *Getting started: the BUG technique* pp 284-5, in Price and Maier (2007) *Effective Study Skills* for more information on how to tackle the question.

Planning

How do you approach your writing task?
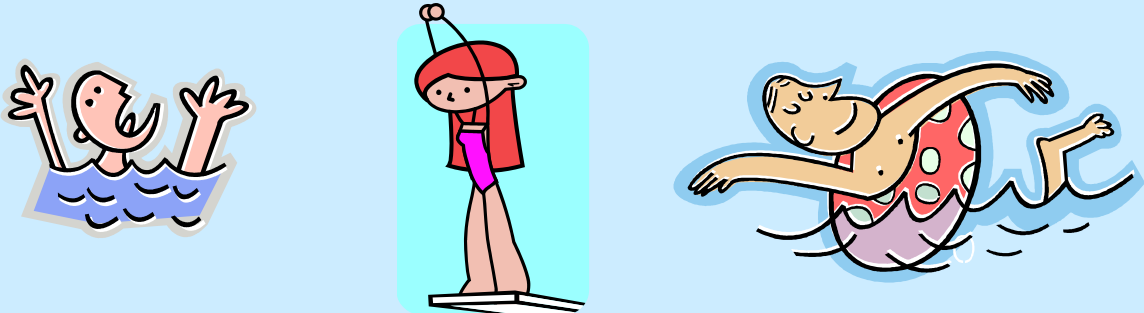
Do you plunge straight in and risk drowning? Do you hover over your desk but never get started? Or do you prepare and swim along confidently?

Academic assignments are too detailed and complex to write in one go. Experienced writers don't just plan what they are going to say, but HOW they will say it and in what ORDER, sometimes reworking the information many times before completion. The plan creates the structure of your writing.

A good piece of writing is a combination of your ideas and a particular structure or format. It needs a shape, an introduction, ordered points with comments and a conclusion. It will probably compare, discuss and evaluate. It should lead somewhere, taking the reader along with it, and you should know roughly where it will end up before you start writing. So you need to plan your ideas rather just pour the information onto the page. There is a variety of ways of doing this which help you capture and sort your ideas without getting locked into the linear process too early.

How can you plan if you haven't done all your research? The trick is to **make an outline plan** to give direction to your research. It can be adapted and developed as you go. It shouldn't be a straitjacket but nor should it bear no resemblance to your completed assignment.

Here are some ideas on how to plan. If you are a visual learner, you can use mind maps or spider diagrams. Programs such as Inspiration or Mind Manager can help you to organise your ideas on screen using colour, links, templates (such as flow charts) and images.

Examples of mind maps can be found at
http://www.tonybuzan.com/gallery/mind-maps/

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This diagram shows the **stages of the writing process**.

Tip: you could use concept pyramids (see Cottrell, *The Study Skills Handbook*, Chapter 7, p153-4)

If you are a verbal learner, you can use headings, lists of key words or bullet points, on-screen, on post-it notes or cards. Post-it notes are good because you can move them around to change the order of your points easily. Remember, you don't want to start writing at this point, just get an overview. To get started, do a **word count plan**:

If your assignment is 2000 words, allow about 200 words (10%) for the introduction and 200 for the conclusion. That leaves 1600 words for the main body. So, if you want to make 8 main points, each paragraph will be about 200 words long. Of course some points will be more important and complex than others, so your paragraphs won't be all the same length. By working out roughly how much you can write on each point, you will begin to see the shape of your whole assignment. It should help you not to write too much or too little.

If you are an auditory learner, you can discuss your ideas with others or record yourself expressing your ideas. To avoid getting too random, prepare as if for a presentation, where your ideas will need to be grouped together and presented in a logical order.

Frameworks are useful whether you are a visual, verbal or auditory learner. Many assignments involve a discussion, an argument, items to compare and contrast and evaluate. A ready-made framework allows you to categorise your ideas as you go.

Areas for comparison	Similarities	Differences
1		
2		
3		
4		

(See Cottrell, *The Study Skills Handbook*, Chapter 8, p176 and p179 for more frameworks.)

Planning Reports

Unlike essays, project and lab reports are usually divided into clear sections with headings. Headings make it easier to organise information. As each section may need a list of numbered sub-headings, it is important to separate and order your ideas carefully. Further information about writing reports, including a list of standard headings can be found at:
http://www.studyskills.soton.ac.uk/studytips/science_writing.htm.

Research

You can find information from a variety of sources: your reading list, books and journals (including e-books and e-journals, the internet, lectures, seminars and tutorials and questionnaires). It is easy to get overwhelmed by gathering too much information so you need to be selective. **Your outline plan will help to prevent this**. The important thing is not just to collect information but to group related ideas together and evaluate them as you go along.

You can ask yourself:
- do I need this?
- how will I use this in my assignment?

You can decide how to use information by constantly referring back to your question and turning some of the headings you have on your outline plan into sub-questions. These sub-questions help you to go deeper into the particular aspect of the subject you are working on. You can practise thinking of sub-questions by reading a paragraph in a text book and making up a short question that you think the paragraph tries to answer. If the paragraph already has a heading, turn the heading into a question.

It is a good idea to sort information into three piles:
- will definitely use
- might use
- background research done but won't actually use

Tip: Don't forget to make a complete note of the reference as you go along.

For more information on how to classify information while you research, see the Enabling Services guide to *Reading and Research Skills*. For more information on research skills see 'Developing an Effective Search Strategy': www.studyskills.soton.ac.uk/studyguides/Search%20Strategy.doc.

Detailed Structure

When you have planned the overall structure of the assignment, you can consider the structure of each paragraph or section.

Paragraph structure has three parts:

topic sentence	introduces one main point
s**upporting sentences**	**explain** the point (with examples) back up the point (with references) comment on the **evidence**
concluding sentences	summarise the paragraph **link** to the next paragraph

Think of this as the **PEEL** technique.

The first and last paragraphs which form the introduction and conclusion of your assignment will be slightly different.

The **introduction** may contain:
- words taken from the question to make general points
- definitions of key words used
- statements of what the assignment covers and order of presentation
- brief mention of main theories, themes or models used

The **conclusion** may contain a:
- reference back to the question
- summary of the main points
- statement of what has been learnt

As well as the introductory and concluding paragraphs, other parts of the assignment may have specific functions. Common writing functions include: analysing, arguing, describing, explaining, evaluating, interpreting and reflecting. It is a good idea to consider what function you are aiming at and perhaps label it in the margin of your draft. This will help you to use language tailored to each function. For example, you may be able to use first person, *I,* in the reflective part of your assignment but not elsewhere.

A useful guide to paragraph structure can be found at: dyslexstudyskills.group.shef.ac.uk/writing/index.html

Signposting

You can think of your writing as a journey that you want the reader to follow smoothly and easily from beginning to end. As well as putting your paragraphs or sections in a logical order, you can help the reader to follow your argument by signposting them from one idea to another to the conclusion. Signposts, sometimes called link words or transitional devices, perform different functions. Here are ten useful signposts, grouped under

the functions they perform that will allow you to communicate effectively with your readers:

1   add more ideas:
    again, furthermore, in addition, moreover

2   compare or contrast ideas:
    alternatively, in contrast, conversely, whereas

3   prove something:
    evidently, for this reason, because, inevitably

4   show exceptions:
    however, nevertheless, yet, in spite of

5   repeat or refer back to something:
    As has been mentioned/noted...

6   show that you will include something later:
    This will be discussed in more detail later/ in chapter two, etc

7   emphasise something:
    definitely, obviously, clearly, undeniably

8   give an example:
    for example, for instance, in this case, in particular, notably

9   show the order of things:
    previously, following this, initially, subsequently, finally

10 conclude:
    to summarise, in conclusion, consequently

Academic Language

Using academic language helps you to express your ideas clearly and strongly. As well as the technical terms that are specific to your subject, some common words are used in a particular way in an academic context. It is a good idea to define these terms at the beginning of your assignment. For example, in a history or sociology essay, you may need to say what you mean by 'society'. Which society and at what period of time are you talking about?

There are three main ways to make your writing more academic:

Be cautious
As academic ideas are not clear cut, statements are usually introduced in a tentative way, such as: 'It can be argued that...'; 'Recent research suggests...'; 'It is possible that...'; 'Further research is needed to establish whether...'. This kind of language shows that you have considered different points of view, not just jumped to a conclusion. In other words, your writing contains an argument. Being cautious does not mean being vague. Avoid 'sort of' and 'kind of'!
Be impersonal

Academic style often avoids use of the first person, 'I'. Unless you are writing your own reflections or self-evaluation, it is better to write, 'It can be seen that …', rather than 'I think that…'; 'this essay will cover…' rather than 'In this essay I will cover…'.

Be objective
It is better to use neutral rather than emotionally-loaded words. For example, say that a system is 'inefficient' or 'defective', rather than describe it as 'rubbish'. It may take longer to find and spell-check the right word, but you'll gain higher marks.

Further information about academic language can be found at
http://unihub.mdx.ac.uk/study/ldu/onlineresources/academic-language/

There is also an excellent collection of analytical and critical expressions, as well as ways of describing scientific methods and reporting findings at www.phrasebank.manchester.ac.uk.

A guide to technical and scientific writing can be found here:
http://www.studyskills.soton.ac.uk/studytips/science_writing.htm.

Referencing

It is essential to record where your quotations, data and information came from so that the reader can find the original text. As referencing style varies, it is important to consult the guidelines for your course.

A reference provides:
- name and initials of the author or editor
- title
- year of publication
- publisher and place of publication

A typical book reference in the Harvard style, which is commonly used in universities, looks like this:
Price, G. and Maier, P. (2007) *Effective Study Skills.* London: Pearson.

author's surname · author's initial · date of publication · title of book

Price, G. and Maier, P. (2007) *Effective Study Skills.* London: Pearson.

place of publication · publisher
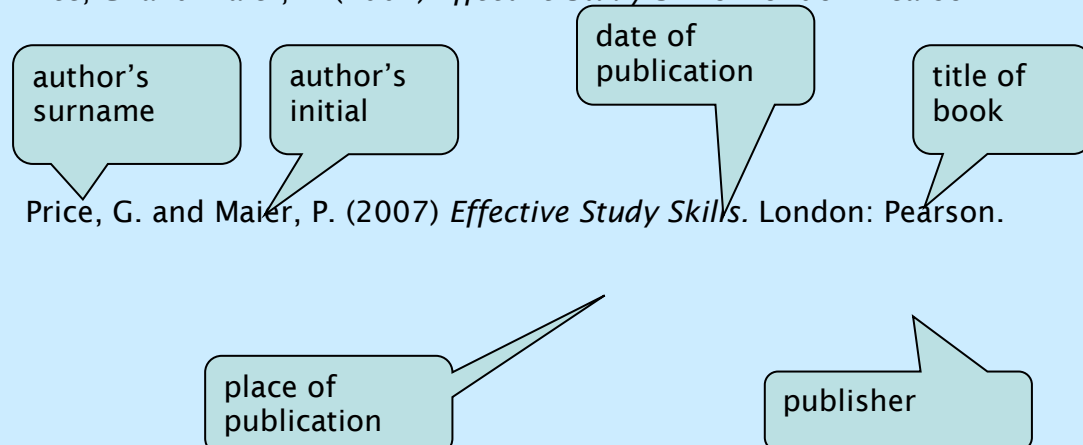
Journal references include the volume and page numbers; electronic references include the full URL or web address.

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Here are some ways of **introducing references** in your text:
Bloggs (2007) argues/concurs/demonstrates/states/suggests '…
According to Bloggs (2007) '…..
In a recent study Bloggs (2007) identifies …
More about referencing can be found here:
www.soton.ac.uk/library/infoskills/references/index.html
dyslexstudyskills.group.shef.ac.uk/referencing/index.html

Look at Information in the Reading and Research booklet page 11 and 12

Editing

You are more likely to spot your errors if you allow a gap between finishing writing and proofreading. It is best to do this as a staged/stepped exercise: read through first to make sure your writing makes sense and then to check for spelling and grammatical errors. Making a checklist of your own typical errors, for example *there/their* confusion, can help because it is always easier if you are checking for specific things.

You will need to look at various aspects of your work:
Content
        Have you
- answered the question?
- covered the main points?
- followed assignment guidelines?
- referenced your sources?

Structure
        Have you
- got a clear introduction, main body and conclusion
- used headings (if required) appropriately?
- linked ideas in a logical order?
- used enough signpost words?

Spelling and punctuation
        Have you
- read your work aloud?
- checked names and technical terms not on your spell checker?
- used sentence breaks correctly?

Style and presentation
        Have you
- followed guidelines, for example on the use of headings and diagrams?
- avoided informal or chatty language?
- used statements such as 'It can be seen that' rather than 'I think that?
- stuck to the word count?

Avoiding Plagiarism

Plagiarism is part of academic integrity and is a hot topic. It means using other people's writing, even if it is not published, in your own work without naming the author. It is viewed as a form of cheating (passing other people's work off as your own) and therefore is taken very seriously by all universities. If you 'recycle' parts of your own assignments without admitting it, this can also been considered a form of plagiarism. The easiest way to avoid plagiarism is to make a note of all sources of information (see the section on Referencing) when you research, even if you may not use them in your completed assignment. Keeping your references up to date makes it so much easier for you to find things again.

More information from the Universities of Southampton and Birmingham about plagiarism can be found at
www.calendar.soton.ac.uk/sectionIV/academic-integrity-statement.html
https://intranet.birmingham.ac.uk/as/studentservices/conduct/plagiarism/index.aspx

What to do if you get stuck

- Write in pencil - you know it's only rough.
- Write for three minutes – get something on the blank page!

Start anywhere – you don't have to write the introduction first.

- Plan your ideas for half an hour then give yourself a treat!

For more tips on how to overcome writer's block see
Cottrell *The Study Skills Handbook*, Chapter 7, pages 136-7)

Further resources

Books

Cottrell, S. (2010) *The Study Skills Handbook*, 3rd edition. Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan.

Pears, R. & Shields, G. (2010). *Cite Them Right: The Essential Referencing Guide*, Palgrave Macmillan.
This book does exactly what it says on the tin!

Price, G. and Maier, P. (2007) *Effective Study Skills: Unlock your potential*, London, Pearson

Websites

www.studyskills.soton.ac.uk/
www.humanities.manchester.ac.uk/studyskills/
dyslexstudyskills.group.shef.ac.uk/index.html

Ginger contextual spelling and grammar software
http://www.gingersoftware.com/

Words often used in essay questions

ACCOUNT FOR
Give the reason for. Not to be confused with 'Give an account of' which is only asking for a description.

ANALYSE
Discuss the main ideas in depth, showing why they are important and how they are connected.

ASSESS
Discuss the strong and weak points of the subject. Make your own conclusion.

COMMENT
State your views on the subject clearly. Back up your points with sufficient evidence and examples.

COMPARE and CONTRAST
Write about the similarities and differences in the subject matter.

CRITICISE
Express your own balanced judgement of the subject. Give views for and against, backed up with examples and references. (Not the same as critically analyse).

DEFINE
Give clear concise meanings; state limitations of the definition. (How it is used in your essay.)

DESCRIBE
Give the main features or characteristics of something or write about the main events or stages in a process.

DISCUSS
Write about the subject in detail, giving points for and against, advantages and disadvantages. Give a balanced conclusion.

EVALUATE
Give your opinion of the importance, usefulness, accuracy, etc of the information. Include good and bad points, backed up with theories and references.

EXAMINE
Look at the subject in detail.

EXPLAIN
State clearly how and why you think something happens or why it is the way it is.

HOW FAR/ TO WHAT EXTENT?
Give your own opinion as to whether something is completely true or accurate, partly true or perhaps not true at all. Back up your points with references

ILLUSTRATE
Use specific examples to make clear points.

INTERPRET
Express what something means in simple terms.

JUSTIFY
Use evidence and reasons to support your judgement. Make your points clearly and forcefully.

OUTLINE
Give the main ideas, but do not go into too much detail.

RELATE	Show how things are connected or similar.
REVIEW	Give an overall view of the subject in a critical way. Pick out and analyse important parts of the subject.
SUMMARISE	Write briefly about the main points or facts, omitting details. Use references to back up your conclusion.

Academic skills guides available from Dyslexia Support

1. Academic writing
2. Dissertations and project writing
3. Memory, revision and exam technique
4. Note taking and note making
5. Organisation and time management
6. Reading and research skills

View on line or download
www.soton.ac.uk/edusupport/dyslexia

Do you know about the *Study Skills Toolkit*?

This is a set of interactive online resources to help you develop your academic skills.

Log into the University's Blackboard website www.blackboard.soton.ac.uk and look for the link to *Study Skills Toolkit*

There is also the EAP (English for Academic Purposes) Toolkit for international students.