

→ SAGE Study Skills

Essay Writing

A Student's Guide

MunLing Shields

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the reasons for writing may be similar (cancelling an appointment), the purpose of one appointment was social while the other was 'business'.

This example tells us something of fundamental importance for all written communication. In order to write effectively, we always need to consider the following:

- the audience (who is the intended reader?);
- the purpose (why are you writing?).

In addition, there are two other considerations which will depend on the answers you get to the 'who' and 'why' questions above, and these are content (the 'what?') and organisation (the 'how?'). These will determine:

- your choice of information and words;
- the grammar and sentence construction;
- the mechanics (spelling, punctuation);
- the style (formal or informal way of writing).

Who? Why? What? How? are the four questions which must to be answered if you want your message to be clear – whatever type of writing you wish to produce. I will refer to these as the 'four Qs' in this chapter.

The four Qs in academic writing

We will now examine the four Qs in academic writing, to show how the 'Who?', 'Why?' and 'What?' lead to the 'How?'

- **Who (your reader):** *Who* will read your work? The main reader will be the tutor(s) of the course, who will most likely have had a hand in setting the assignment. The reader will therefore be a person who is knowledgeable about the content matter of the assignment and who has designed the task with certain expectations in mind. This is especially true of the essay. The reflective diary/journal is a tool for developing self-awareness and reflective skills and is usually assessed by both your tutor and yourself.

Reports may also be read by other interested parties, including your course mates; reviews could be published and read by many in the field; laboratory reports are not only for your tutor, but are also records and evidence of the process and results of work or experiments you have done (especially in psychology and other sciences).

- **Why (your purpose):** *Why* do you write at university? The most obvious reason is that you have to! Written assignments are still the most common way to assess what students *know* and what they *can do*. You write because you want

to get the qualification that proves you have learnt something and can communicate this. Importantly, however, the act of writing is a learning process in itself. When you approach writing critically, you engage in a thinking and learning process which is part of the university tradition. All these are important reasons for writing at university.

To understand specifically why you have to produce a particular piece of writing you need to understand the learning outcomes of the module (see page 16). Understanding what you achieve when you successfully complete an assignment will give you a sense of satisfaction and purpose. Understanding the language of learning outcomes also means you know why assignments and essays are designed and worded in the ways they are.

- **What (the content):** The answer to the question of *what* you write is of course the content and context of your writing. Different types of writing, and even different types of essay, require you to select information in a discriminating and appropriate way. Until you have understood an essay question, you will not know what information is most relevant.
- **How (structure and style):** *How* you write refers to the way information is organised or structured and the way or style in which it is put together, and this may vary from one type of writing to another. For example, reports have a clear structure with headings and are written in a specific reporting style. They are very different from essays, which are almost always presented as continuous prose written according to academic conventions (see page 11). All academic writing is formally structured in a recognisable style, and this must be consistent and appropriate for the particular type of writing. Nevertheless, each type of writing must comply with the academic standards set by most courses, which require a more or less formal style as well as accurate grammar, spelling and punctuation.

This academic style can be confusing to students as it can differ quite radically between different types of writing (for example, a formal essay and a reflective diary entry). Indeed, you may well need to write in more than one style within one piece of work (as when nursing students, for instance, have to reflect on practice and relate theory to practice in the same essay). To make it even more difficult, different subjects or even tutors may or may not accept stylistic variations. When in doubt, ask your tutor and look at examples of good practice.

As you can see, the question of *How* is very much determined by the *Who*, *Why* and *What*. Although you may think you only want to know about the *How* of writing essays, you cannot really gain a full understanding of that until you have some answers to the first three questions.

While this book covers one particular type of writing – the essay – the basic principles set out here can be applied to other types of academic writing. The four Qs may give different answers for different assignments, but they will always be useful answers.