STUDENT SUCCESS

Writing Skills for University

From Day 1 to Dissertation

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Academic Writing and Constructing Academic Arguments

Introduction

Writing skills are important at university since many of your assessments will involve different types of writing, and it is important to be able to express your ideas and knowledge clearly on paper. Academic writing also requires you to be able to debate and lay out your thoughts and construct an academic argument to bring depth and substance to your writing. But writing is not only a skill that you need for university, it is a highly transferable skill that you will rely on in the workplace. Being able to communicate clearly in writing is a skill much sought after by employers, so one well worth taking the time to develop and perfect.

Write regularly

The only way to get better at writing is to write regularly, and to keep on practising. Stephanie Meyer, the author of the *Twilight* books, stated on her website that she writes every day, even if only a page, and that she writes at night so there are less interruptions. Find your best time to write and try and do a little bit every day to make writing a habit; some days you may only be able to do a paragraph or two, but some days it will flow. On days when you feel like you cannot write perhaps you could write a list of things that you want to write and you can pick up your list the following day. However, if you have deadlines looming you might

need to make a realistic plan for when you will work on your coursework, ensuring you have enough time to complete it.

Getting going with your writing

When you are looking at a blank piece of paper or an empty screen it can sometimes seem impossible to get started. But the best thing you can do is to write something. This could be a list of what you want to cover, your paragraph headings, or it could even be the first thing that comes into your head (otherwise known as a brain dump). You don't necessarily have to start at the beginning, if you have some good ideas for points you want to make later in the essay or report, you could write those down and then go back to your introduction later. If I am writing a scientific paper I often write the methods section first, as I find that section the easiest to write, then I do the other sections in order of preference, but I always make sure I have time at the end to go through the paper from start to finish to ensure every section of the paper all links up, is coherent and flows well. But the key thing is that once you have something written on the paper you can add to it, change it and delete as necessary; it will have got you over the starting line and then you can build upon it.

Another approach you could take if you are someone who finds it hard to get things down on paper but you could chat away on any topic, is to try talking to a friend or even yourself whilst recording what you say on your phone (obviously make sure you tell your friend what your plan is before you start recording). You could then transcribe what you recorded and then later go on to add more details and references as needed. Getting started is often the hardest bit, so anything that can get you to start putting words on paper is going to be good.

Whilst getting started may be the hardest part, never be afraid to re-work or re-write what you have written. You might be able to add details, or reword parts so that your message is more concise or clear, move sentences or paragraphs around so they flow better. Re-writing and editing is all part of the writing process.

Approaches to writing

People may approach writing in different ways. Some students prefer to write any old thing down on paper, then get more information and come back and edit it later (as in the brain dump mentioned previously).

However, other students prefer to make a plan. This could involve:

1. Reading around the topic and making notes
2. Highlighting your notes to indicate which information you want to include, perhaps numbering your notes in the order you want to add them to your written piece
3. Making a plan for the work – this might include paragraph headings
4. Writing a first (rough) draft
5. Checking where you need more information or details
6. Ensuring each section links with the next
7. Editing any spelling and grammatical errors
8. Writing your reference list; although you could leave this to close to the end, it is probably better to do as you go along
9. Reading through and checking your final draft
10. Submitting your work

After you have finished your work and you have received feedback on it, you might want to reflect on what worked well and what you could do differently next time to make the whole writing process easier in the future.

Writing style

The writing style that you need to use may depend on the piece of work. There is more information on this in Part 2, where there are chapters that describe the different types of written work, but some general guidance is provided here.

Firstly, you should consider who you are writing for. If you are writing for an academic audience you are likely to word this very differently than if you are writing an article for a magazine, or a story for young readers, so be sure to adapt your style to suit your audience accordingly.

Students often ask if they should write in the first person, where you put yourself in your writing, for example, 'I think that….'. If you are writing a diary entry, a memoir, or a reflective piece of work it would be very usual to write in the first person, e.g.: 'I felt that the work provided valuable experience of…'.

However in most academic work, and particularly if you are writing for a scientific subject, you should try to write in the third person, avoiding 'I' or 'you'. So instead of saying:

> 'I put potassium permanganate into the test tube and I stirred the mixture.'

You would write:

> 'Potassium permanganate was put into the test tube and the mixture was stirred.'

In scientific writing you are also aiming for a passive voice rather than an active voice, so:

> 'The mixture was stirred' rather than 'Stir the mixture.'

The only exception would be if you were writing a manual or a recipe where you are writing instructions for someone to follow, and here the active voice would be more usual.

Past tense

If you are writing a novel, although you can write in the present tense, it is more common to write in the past tense.

> **Present tense**: Ajmal runs down the road.
>
> **Past tense**: Ajmal ran down the road.

Scientific writing is usually in the past tense.

> **Present tense**: Analyse the questionnaire.
>
> **Past tense**: The questionnaire was analysed.

Try to be as clear and precise as you can in your writing and avoid generalisations. For example, if you did a survey of just two supermarkets say, Asda and Lidl, don't say you looked at supermarkets including Asda and Lidl, because this would imply there were other supermarkets included.

You should also avoid very general terms such as 'quite', for example if something is 'quite heavy', is it heavy or not? Could you add more details such as the exact weight, for example, to help quantify what you are stating?

Sentence structure

Technically sentences should have a subject, a verb and an object, or to put it more simply, a sentence should explain who (the subject), does what (the action, i.e. the verb), to whom (the object) (Hopkins & Reid,

2018). But essentially your sentence should stand alone and make sense. Try not to make your sentences too long and complicated with unnecessary words. Short sentences can sometimes be clearer but too many short sentences can also read a bit like a list and break up the flow of your writing, so try to get the balance right.

Reading your work out loud can really help with the clarity of your sentences, and help you ensure that each sentence follows on from the previous one. In this way use your sentences to build paragraphs, remembering that 'A sentence does not a paragraph make' (Anon), i.e., paragraphs should be longer than one sentence and contain more information than you could put in one sentence. However, rules can occasionally be broken, and sometimes in creative writing a one sentence paragraph is used to attract the reader's attention, give emphasis to a point, or perhaps to insinuate that something is urgent. Whilst an occasional one sentence paragraph is fine it is best not to overdo it.

Paragraph structure

Organising your writing into paragraphs is not only easier for the reader to negotiate your writing section by section, but also because they are a key way of structuring your writing. You should start a new line when starting a new paragraph and you should start a new paragraph every time you introduce a new idea or topic. If you are presenting a person or a character for the first time, or moving to a different location, then you should also start a new paragraph.

Each paragraph should also have a structure; you may have come across PEEL before. PEEL is an acronym for: Point, Evidence, Evaluation, Link. This can be quite a useful way of organising and explaining your thoughts:

- Introduce the **point** you want to make
- Show your **evidence** to support this view
- **Evaluate** and critique of the evidence
- Conclude your point and **link** to the next paragraph

However if you think this is too restrictive, you don't have to stick rigidly to this idea, but it certainly can help you start to prepare for academic arguments (more on this later).

Spelling and grammar

Whilst we don't want a focus on spelling and grammar to get in the way of your creative flow, the correct spelling and grammar is key to getting

your point across in the way you intended and it is a key part of good writing skills.

Most computers have built in spelling and grammar checks and with apps like Grammarly it is now easier than ever to ensure your spelling and grammar are correct. So do make sure you are using the checks that you have at your fingertips. But it is often worth going back to basics to ensure your writing is presented in the best possible way.

Punctuation

Make sure you start every sentence with a capital letter, likewise for proper nouns (i.e. names of persons, places or things), and complete each sentence with a full stop, for example: '**T**ommy is visiting **B**irmingham on **F**riday**.'**

If you are asking a question, substitute the full stop for a **question mark** e.g.: 'What is the question**?**'

Exclamation points can be used instead of a full stop if you are trying to express shock or surprise**!**

Use an **apostrophe** to:

a. Indicate ownership e.g. 'Shirley's coat is blue'
b. Denote missing letters e.g. Isn't to mean 'is not'

If the words are being spoken, such as by a character in a story, or they are a direct quote, use inverted commas e.g. **"**All's well that ends well.**"**

Colons can be used when you need to add further information: 'To cook pancakes you will need the following: flour, eggs and milk.'

Semi-colons can be used to connect independent clauses within a sentence, for example: 'Charlotte has gone to the ball; her sister stayed home.'

Hyphens are used to show the relationship between words e.g. 'check-in', or 'son-in-law.'

Commas can be used in different ways and essentially separate difference parts of sentences.

When speech is being presented, commas are used between the direct speech and the narration. For example:

a. Jane said, 'Do you have this in a larger size?'
b. 'Do you have this in a larger size?', she said.

After words or phrases that come before the main clause e.g.: ‘However, research has shown…’

To add more information that perhaps could be considered an aside: ‘

My physics textbook, which weighs a ton, has some really great examples.’

When listing: ‘The soup included onions, garlic, carrots, and coriander.’

And that brings us on to the Oxford Comma. **The Oxford comma** is when you add a comma to a list before the final and, to clarify a sentence that would otherwise be unclear. One example of this is: ‘I have pictures in my room of my friends, Taylor Swift and Beyoncé.’

This gives the impression that the writer is friends with Taylor Swift and Beyoncé but adding the Oxford comma makes it clearer that it is a list: ‘I have pictures in my room of my friends, Taylor Swift, and Beyoncé.’

However, some grammar experts think the Oxford comma is bad form and so it is sometimes seen as being controversial. Whatever your preference it is best to be consistent throughout your writing.

Abbreviations

These are frequently used for the names of organisations, or in scientific writing where there may be some very long terms that would be time consuming to write out every time. In these cases, the first time you use the term you should write it out in full and put the abbreviation in brackets, for example:

The World Health Organization (WHO)

Measurements were shown on a liquid crystal display (LCD)

From there on in, you can just use the abbreviation.

Constructing academic arguments

Most pieces of academic writing, including essays, reports and theses, will include some sort of academic argument. An academic argument is where you make a claim or present a particular take on a topic, and then debate the evidence for and against the point you are trying to make. Perhaps the word ‘argument’ could be misleading as you are not having a row or a battle, rather you are presenting evidence and providing reasoning for your argument. You want to

ensure that your argument is both coherent and convincing (Wallace & Wray, 2021). So, you are not just voicing your opinion but presenting evidence to justify your point. For example, you could say: 'Young people eat a lot of fast food,' but this is just an anecdotal opinion. However, if you can incorporate and refer to relevant data you can show the reader how you are justifying your opinion. For example: 'The data from the Office for Public Health shows that there is a clear trend for young people to eat increasingly frequently at fast food restaurants.'

In this way it is clear to the reader that you have done your research and have found relevant evidence, in this case in the form of data, to back up your claim.

The evidence you present may not always be data, though this would certainly be common in the sciences; however in other subject areas your evidence could come from facts, published works, details from images, maps, or in some cases testimony, and if you were writing a reflective review it could even be your own personal experience (although please note that reflective accounts are different in this respect: your personal experience could be considered a source of bias in an essay or a report).

Most written academic arguments would follow a structure similar to that shown in Figure 4.1 and detailed below:

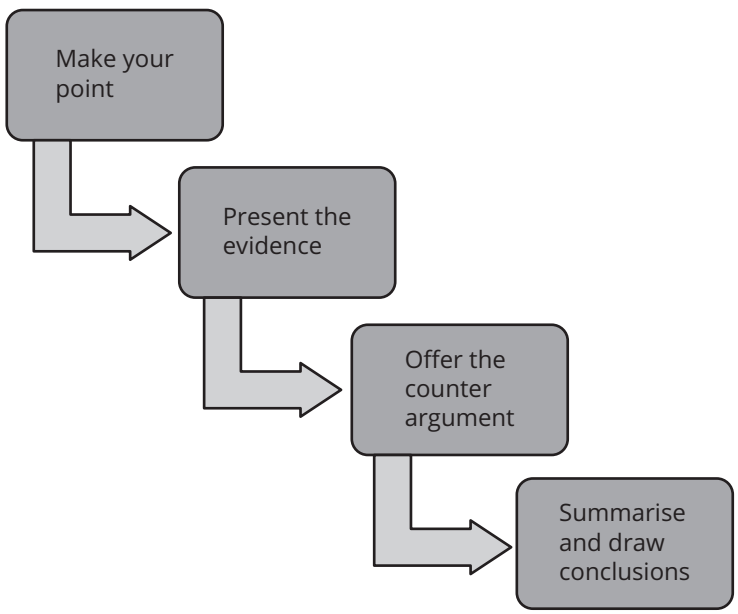

Figure 4.1 The stepwise structure of an academic argument

1. **Make your point**

This is where you state your point, or make a claim; this is a statement of what you are trying to prove and defend, so make it a strong argument.

2. **Present the evidence**

Here you should present your evidence to prove your case, it might be published work, data or examples that you can show as proof for your point.

3. **Offer the counter argument**

There could be objections to the point you are trying to make, so try to think what these could be, and consider the alternative viewpoints; what objections could someone have to your original point, and why might these arguments not hold up?

4. **Summarise and draw your conclusions**

This is where you summarise your findings and present a balanced overview of the point and consider the broader context.

Do make sure you avoid logical fallacies. A logical fallacy is where an argument appears to be true, and you may even have some evidence, but the evidence may not automatically be enough to prove your argument, so ultimately your argument could be false. A logical fallacy could be a deliberate attempt to try and persuade the reader, perhaps even playing on their emotions, but more often than not, it is based on weak evidence or flawed reasoning. To avoid falling into this trap make sure you have researched all the facts and your evidence is solid and reliable, making sure your writing is clear and unambiguous.

Do also try to be aware of your own bias. Whilst you might have a strong opinion on the point you are trying to present, make sure you don't exaggerate in order to get your views across, and do try to consider all the opposing arguments too, ensuring you are thoughtful and respectful of other viewpoints.

Good arguments are comprehensive and based on reliable evidence; they may be nuanced to show that you have considered all the angles and critiqued the data that you have, but they are never an all-out attack, they must be balanced and academic. Be as clear and specific as you can as this is how you will convince the reader of your point, as you join the academic debate.

Top tip from a student 4.1

If I am worried that my writing is not clear enough, I read it out loud so that I can spot any mistakes and be sure it makes sense. Princess

Chapter summary

When it comes to writing, the most important thing is to write regularly and preferably every day to practise this skill and improve your writing style. Spelling and grammar are important for communicating clearly and if this is not your strong point there are built-in grammar and spell checks, as well as apps you can use to get this right. Academic debate and critique are an important part of the writing process and you can organise your writing to make your point, present evidence and consider counter arguments in a structured manner to present a strong but clear argument. Putting your writing skills into practice, such as when writing essays and other types of written assessment, will be covered in Part 2 of this book.

Check list

- Find your preferred time to write
- Try to write regularly and ideally every day
- Do you feel confident you know which tense to write in?
- Can you construct an academic argument?

Further reading

Truss, L. (2009) *Eats, Shoots and Leaves*. London: Harper Collins.