

# 1

## Managing your Writing Environment



### developmental objectives

By applying the strategies, doing the exercises and following the procedural steps in this chapter, you should be able to:

- Take a proactive approach to reducing the stress that accompanies academic writing.
- Learn how to network for support.
- Identify strategies and online tools to increase productivity and manage more efficiently yourself and your writing.
- Ensure results-oriented communication with your lecturers and supervisors.
- Understand key cross-cultural challenges of writing and communication, why these exist and how to address them.
- Develop capacity with mobile technologies and make informed decisions about using commercially hosted web services.

It is common for graduates to experience ups and downs with academic writing and communication. Feelings of confidence, excitement, self-doubt, disinterest, frustration, lack of motivation, isolation and so forth may alternate, such mood swings being typical rather than unusual. This chapter covers a broad range of management strategies designed to reduce stress and improve the quality of your writing environment.



## Effective self-management

Effective self-management for academic writing invites a variety of strategies. We begin with the importance of establishing networks.

### Networking for support

While networking requires effort, it can be worth the investment of your valuable time, particularly if you are enrolled in a longer research degree. These networking strategies should help alleviate stress while contributing to a greater sense of integration in the academic community at large.

#### Generating peer support: local, national and international

Students in your course or research group can be an excellent support resource, so be proactive in making yourself known to them. Make contact too with the graduate student organization within your institution, if there is one. Such organizations usually provide a range of social and academic support, have useful online resources, are often advocates for resolution of issues of concern to graduates, and may represent graduates' interests on important institutional committees. It is similar with national sites, such as The National Postgraduate Committee (UK), the Council of Australian Postgraduate Associations or the National Association of Graduate-Professional Students (USA).

There are numbers of international graduate student and dissertation support sites on the Internet. Many enquiries about writing are posted on such sites, as is copious information about 'surviving' graduate studies. Even joining a chat group with other graduates sharing your interests can lend support – discuss this possibility with peers and academics in your area. Well-established and useful sites with an international reach include The Association for Support of Graduate Students, Graduate Junction: the worldwide community of graduate researchers and Vitae: Realising the potential of researchers.

If you do not know about it, check out Jorge Cham's 'Piled higher and deeper: a graduate student comic strip collection', which will afford light relief and a welcome sense of solidarity in knowing that, whatever your problem, others have been there before you!

#### Identifying institutional resources available for developmental assistance

Thoroughly explore your institution's website to find out what supplementary assistance is on offer for study, research and writing. Search across institutions too as you may locate the precise materials you need on another institution's site. Academic skills, learning or writing centres of different institutions in different countries often provide electronic resources specific to graduate writing and communication that could be useful. Check with your lecturer/supervisor that advice provided is sound in their view, if you are unsure.

### Making use of visiting scholars and other disciplinary experts

Introduce yourself to visiting scholars and attend relevant conferences/seminars they give while at your institution. Where research interests coincide, a visiting scholar may be willing to give advice and even provide feedback on a draft. You could also benefit from contact with other disciplinary experts.



#### case study example

##### box 1.1 Other disciplinary experts can be a valuable resource

A doctoral student realized when writing up that there was a gap in her reading (not so unusual). She needed an overview of one aspect of a famous philosopher's work about which she knew little, as she was not a Philosophy student. A quick database search turned up literally hundreds of potential sources that left her, as she said, 'totally depressed'. So she searched for an expert in nineteenth-century philosophy, contacted him, explained her situation and asked him if he could refer her to an appropriate source for what she needed. This he did. In her own words: 'This saved me heaps of time – there were just so many sources – really put me on the right track with my reading.'

### Cultivating understanding of close ones

Colleagues, friends and family can be excellent sources of support if you cultivate their understanding of your study commitments. Sometimes, however, it can be difficult for those closest to you to accept what appears to them to be inflexibility, or even selfishness on your part, when you are unavailable for a social invitation or a request for help. As this type of dilemma is not unusual, you may need to work at gaining more understanding from those close to you (see → the 'Balanced self-management exercise' below, which includes relationship goals in time management). Tell them well in advance that there will be times when you will not be available, and remind them of this when such occasions arise. Perhaps, too, keep reminding them, and yourself, that whatever the duration of your studies, the period will come to an end.



#### key points

By identifying peak writing periods in advance (see the next section), you will be able to give partners, family and friends ample warning.

### **Working on your inner resources**

It is not easy to find the right words to express complex ideas, to structure or organize material on the scale of, say, a dissertation, a long report or essay, or to develop subtle arguments and discussions. Writing is an intellectually demanding task and one that rarely goes smoothly. As one student said: 'Writing is a matter of thinking writing, thinking writing, thinking writing – it is never just writing.'

There will be difficult spots. At such times there can be a tendency to be harshly self-critical, even to resurrect inner saboteurs ('I've always been hopeless at writing'), to use negative reinforcers that cement a sense of failure. It is then necessary to work on your own resources with a view to positively reinforcing your efforts, to recall past and present academic successes, to be patient with yourself, to remember that the act of writing is always about learning to write (it is little different with presenting), to genuinely value your own efforts and to visualize that degree certificate in your hand – it will happen.

### **Building your online networks**

Having good relationships with your face-to-face research group or course-work colleagues is important, but so too is drawing support from online communities and contacts. Use Facebook and other social networking services not only for sharing experiences and keeping in regular touch with friends and family, but also for developing collegial and professional networks in your discipline area. These networks need not be limited by space and time and you could find some of the contacts you make extremely valuable later on. You might also consider starting up a Facebook group with your local 'study buddies' or one based on your field of research.

If Facebook does not appeal, then other social networking services can prove highly valuable. Ning.com is widely considered the standard for group social networking but it charges for most of its services. However, there are a number of free group services available, all with excellent functionality, including discussion forums, chat and instant messaging (IM), video and photosharing, blogs, event announcements, subgroups and more. Just Google 'free alternatives to Ning' and you will find a number of such services.

### **Pre-planning: maximizing effort**

Maximizing effort entails effective self-management in all sectors of your life. It is near impossible to maximize effort in terms of communication activities in a course of study or research if other significant areas of your life are under strain.



**exercise: balanced self-management**

**Step 1**

Review closely the 'The self-management matrix' in Figure 1.1. Thinking about the implications of these four quadrants for your own situation can be illuminating, particularly if you are writing a thesis in a research-only degree where there are no course deadlines to meet.

	<b>Urgent</b>	<b>Not Urgent</b>
I m p o r t a n t	<b>Quadrant 1</b>  <b>Immediate commitments</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Deadline-driven projects</li> <li>• Crises</li> <li>• Pressing problems</li> <li>• Always putting out fires</li> <li>• Problem-minded</li> <li>• Fragmentation</li> <li>• Controlled by events</li> <li>• HIGH STRESS – burnout</li> </ul>	<b>Quadrant 2 ☺</b>  <b>Empowering activities</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Proactive, <i>principle-centred</i></li> <li>• Balance: <i>relationships and results</i> oriented (holistic)</li> <li>• Prioritization, clarifying values, assessing worth of activities</li> <li>• Specific goal setting – long, intermediate and short term</li> <li>• Scheduling time to meet goals</li> <li>• Opportunity-minded</li> <li>• Synergy</li> <li>• Fun and relaxation</li> <li>• In control</li> <li>• LOW STRESS – flexibility</li> </ul>
	<b>Quadrant 3</b>  <b>Proximate activities (need to watch these)</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Interruptions, some phone calls</li> <li>• Some social and popular activities</li> <li>• Some mail/email</li> <li>• Some meetings</li> <li>• Many proximate and pressing matters</li> </ul>	<b>Quadrant 4 ☹</b>  <b>Time wasters (in context of work)</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Escape activities</li> <li>• Social chat: face-to-face, email, Facebook, Twitter, etc.</li> <li>• TV, computer games, Internet, some phone calls</li> <li>• Endless housecleaning</li> <li>• Trivia, lots of busywork</li> </ul>

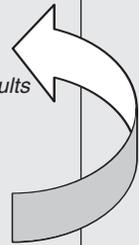


FIGURE 1.1 The self-management matrix (adapted from 'The time management matrix' Covey, 2004: 151)

*(Continued)*

Effective self-management means avoiding the trap of Quadrant 1 (all too easy for busy graduates), of being driven to the time-wasting distractions of Quadrant 4 because of Quadrant 1 pressures and stress, or of attributing undue importance to the activities of Quadrant 3, which need to be monitored closely. It means training yourself to reside comfortably in Quadrant 2 as much as possible, for as Covey says:

The way you spend your time is a result of the way you see your time and the way you really see your priorities. If your priorities grow out of a principle centre and a personal mission, if they are deeply planted in your heart and in your mind, you will see Quadrant II as a natural exciting place to invest your time. (2004: 158)

Work towards embedding your study or research priorities as a set of balanced life activities. Generate expectations focused on preserving and enhancing relationships and on achieving results. Develop a clear idea of the results you desire in your life, and organize and execute priorities aimed at these results.

**Step 2**

Detail all regular commitments, and include prioritized weekly goals in terms of desired results. Do this for each of the four sectors tabulated below, with the aim of achieving balanced self-management:

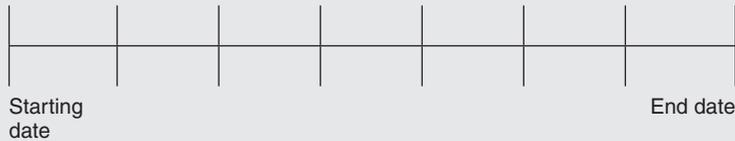
Research/Study/Writing	Work/Teaching	Relationships	Individual/Personal Development
		Partner? Children? Other family members? Friends?	Physical Mental Emotional Spiritual
<b>(Detail priorities and specific goals for the week in terms of desired results)</b>			<i>(It is important not to exclude your private/ personal needs)</i>

**Step 3**

Set up a **weekly timetable**. Build in flexibility – allow for (at least in your mind) the unanticipated ‘urgent’ of Quadrant 1. A scheduled activity might need to be passed over because of a higher value (for example, a sick child). Better still, is a **yearly diary or calendar** in which you can detail goals, and activities to meet those goals, week-by-week.

**Step 4**

Set up a timeline that gives you an overview of your whole course (whether a research or coursework degree):



Mark along the timeline **priority dates** (for example, due dates for items of coursework assessment, or dates for seminar/conference papers, progress review papers, thesis outlines or chapters, and so on). As these become known, include in your yearly calendar advance deadlines and dates for preparatory activities to meet those deadlines.

**Exploit your natural biorhythms**

On a more immediate level, individual circumstances, course requirements, personal preferences and personal peak energy flows can influence when you write and how you organize your writing time and other communication activities. Some students concentrate better in shorter periods, taking frequent short breaks. Others prefer longer writing periods with fewer but longer breaks. Some work a 9 to 5 day, or stay up half the night and sleep late. Some see no choice but to write at night after full-time employment and/or when the children have gone to bed. Maximize effort by harnessing your natural biorhythms to best effect, reserving peak energy periods for the harder intellectual tasks of writing.

**Regularize your writing pattern**

Whatever your circumstances, try to establish a regular writing pattern that is viable for you, allows you to write when you are likely to be most productive, given your various commitments, and that can be adjusted when necessary. Graduates have reported that regularizing the writing pattern helps in these ways:

- Reduces the anxiety often associated with the 'I'll write when I can' approach, an approach that easily leads to writing being delayed.
- Encourages thinking through the setting up of a detailed writing schedule.
- Provides a stronger sense of working steadily towards completion of the writing task.
- Increases confidence in completing the task given your many and varied commitments.
- Allows you to forewarn family and friends of your unavailability at certain times, which in turn reduces household stress.

### **Boost your motivation**

Motivation is another issue frequently raised by graduates. Motivation levels will fluctuate. But your inner ‘motivator’ may at times need a full recharge. Perhaps your interest in your project is depleted – you feel bored, or your confidence has plunged and you seriously doubt your potential, or you are frustrated because you cannot get the help you need, or a troubled relationship is claiming all your attention, or you are oppressed by financial struggle and so forth. Any one, or a combination of these factors, can make you feel flat, not motivated at all.

At this point **STOP!** Try to recharge your motivation by employing the ‘action before motivation’ technique. The idea behind this method is that if you ‘just do something, anything’, then the motivation to continue will naturally follow. To help you get under way, begin with the ‘principle of five’: just do five pages, or five paragraphs, or five minutes, or five of anything you set yourself. If you can get through five of something, then you will probably find either that your motivation has returned, or that, because you have made a start, it is not worth stopping. If this does not work, then you might also try to pin down what is causing you to feel so unmotivated. Address the particular problems sapping your motivation, perhaps by talking these over with a professional counsellor, so as to take control of the situation.

### **Managing the hazards of computer work**

Engaging in proactive strategies to manage physical stress is no less important than for psychological stressors. More attention is now being given to the health hazards accompanying long hours of sitting at a computer or desk. It is best to vary your activities as much as you can. Intersperse computer work with other tasks such as reading, monitoring experiments or tests, drafting ideas for the next chapter, outlining an essay or report and so forth, anything that you might be able to do *away from* the computer. Make your tasks multi-various, particularly when producing lengthy texts like theses and long reports. Also watch for web-based time-wasters – such as Facebook and YouTube – that drive you to spend lengthy periods at the computer screen.

Obtain advice or material from the occupational health and safety service in your institution on how best to avoid occupational overuse syndrome, which can lead to debilitating repetitive strain injuries. Ask if staff can review the set-up of your workstation and provide you with a range of simple flexing and stretching exercises to perform frequently.

### **Electronic tools for increasing productivity**

Once you understand the principles of effective self-management you can begin to explore ways to support your planning activities through the use of

productivity tools available both on the web and digitally. These tools can be downloaded and installed (for example, calendaring software such as iCal or Outlook) on your computer or smart device or accessed online by logging into an account (for example, Google Calendar).

Which tools you choose will depend on your needs and circumstances. For instance, if you work across a variety of digital devices – a computer in the office, a smartphone for when you are on the go, and a laptop at home – then you should choose tools that will synchronize across those devices or that are accessible anytime online. If you work primarily on one machine, for example, your home personal computer (PC), then installing locally hosted software might be your preferred option. Given the increasingly mobile nature of modern workplaces, however, finding tools that will synchronize across devices is probably the safest way to go.

### **Calendars and reminders**

Calendar applications are available as software that you can install on your computer (for example, iCal or Outlook) or as applications that you can access anywhere online (for example, Google Calendar). Most digital calendaring systems allow you to set different ‘views’ – daily, weekly, monthly, yearly, and so on – and your activity can be made public or kept private.

If you work across several devices, then choose a calendar service that will synchronize. Calendars will also allow you to set ‘reminders’ for matters such as important meetings, events or due dates, but reminder applications are also available independent of calendar services, and can be downloaded for smartphones and tablet devices. Search your smartphone’s app store for ‘reminders’ and you will pull up a number of useful applications.

### **To-do or task lists**

Many people prefer writing their to-do lists on paper, but more and more are finding it convenient to keep such lists online or on their mobile devices. The more established calendaring systems will often support to-do or task lists, but smaller, more dedicated services such as Rememberthemilk.com or Toodledo.com provide more flexibility in how you set up your lists and have the added bonus of supporting apps that synchronize content across your devices.

### **Note-taking**

Again, many students prefer to take notes on paper, but the advantages of taking notes electronically is that they become more accessible, can be archived more effectively, and are more easily searchable. The disadvantage is that you always need a digital device at hand for recording your notes! Online services such as Evernote.com and Zoho.com’s Notebook allow you to

include images, audio, hyperlinks, pdfs and other rich media in your notes. If you are fairly mobile, then a service that synchronizes across your devices is preferable. Many dedicated note-taking apps are available for smartphones and tablet devices – just do a search in your app store.

### **File storage**

Because of problems with version control, it is not desirable to email documents to colleagues (or yourself!). At the same time, it is imprudent to keep all your important files on a flash drive. Having an online repository for your files is a smart way to manage your many documents and files, whether you are sharing them with others or simply accessing them yourself. Services such as Box.net and Dropbox.com permit you to organize your files and folders online and synchronize them to your local computer or device (including smartphone) for pick-up when you are offline. As with most such productivity tools mentioned here, you can choose to share materials with others or to keep them for your access only.

### **Online documents**

Although most students are accustomed to using Microsoft Office products (that is, Word, PowerPoint, Excel, and so on), growing numbers of people are finding it convenient to use non-proprietary and freely available online document services such as Google Docs, Open Office and Zoho. These are online software suites that include word processing, spreadsheets, presentations (slideshows), forms, drawing, file storage, and more. They can be accessed anywhere online, meaning that you do not need to store your files separately or carry a flash drive around with you just so you can work on your thesis, report or essay. For most purposes, the basic functionality of these tools is comparable with that of Office products, but if you use more specialized tools, such as macros or labels, then you should stay with Microsoft Office.

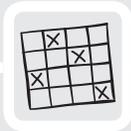
### **Google**

If you are looking for a ‘one-stop-shop’ that covers all of the above online productivity tools, then Google is probably your most efficient solution. A single Google account will give you access to dedicated calendar, file hosting and document services, and provide you with an array of ‘gadgets’ that you can add to your account settings to boost functionality. There are also smartphone apps available for many, but not yet all, Google services.

## **Managing multiple communication tasks**

Managing multiple communication tasks can be complicated, particularly if you are a coursework student with several items of assessment for different

courses due around the same time. This type of situation can cause coursework graduates much anxiety. As a research student, you may also have converging deadlines, and feel the resulting pressure. To improve your management of multiple communication tasks, consider these procedural steps well in advance.



### exercise: multiple communication task planning

#### Step 1

Count the number of days that remain to the due date of your final item of assessment. Now, decide how many days from your total number of days you wish to allot to each item of assessment. Consider the value of each item of assessment in doing this; an item worth 20 per cent does not warrant time equal to an item worth 80 per cent.

#### Step 2

Nominate an end-date for completion of all tasks for each item of assessment. Your end-dates will not be the same as actual submission dates or exam dates, as indicated below for three hypothetical items of assessment to take place in one week in June:

(Report due 16 June): end-date for completion 19 May

(Research essay due 18 June): end-date for completion 3 June

(Exam on 20 June): end-date for all revision 19 June

You may prefer to complete an item before moving to the next, or to work simultaneously on specific tasks associated with two or more items (for example, database searching for an essay while drafting a report).

#### Step 3

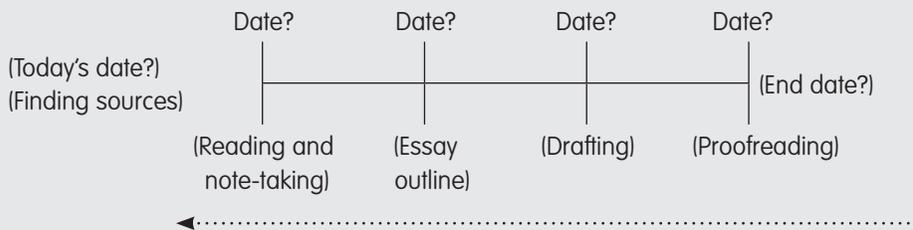
Discriminate tasks needing to be done to meet your end-date for each item of assessment. For example, for an essay (see → 'Research essays', Chapter 5), these tasks could be as follows:

- Search for appropriate source material after brainstorming the topic (see → 'Topics (or questions)' in Chapter 5).
- Read identified source material and take notes (see → 'Ensuring task-focused information' in Chapter 2).

*(Continued)*

- Produce an essay outline (see → 'Visual mapping of material' and 'Sequential outlining' in Chapter 4).
- Draft the essay (one, two or three drafts?).
- Proofread, check accuracy of references, figurative illustrations and their legends, and polish presentation.

Now, set up timelines for the different items of assessment. Include rough estimates of time to complete the specific tasks for each item of assessment, as indicated below by way of an essay example:



**(Work backwards from the end-date in allotting time to completion of specific tasks)**

Add your different timelines to your electronic calendar or pin them above your regular workstation so that you can monitor your progress in meeting deadlines.

## Communicating with lecturers and supervisors

Good communication is the key to establishing positive working relationships with your lecturers and supervisors. Never think that you may be thought inadequate because of some question, however trivial, you want to ask: you are always learning and your lecturer/supervisor is there to help you progress. Also, never assume that your supervisor will recognize that you need help. Supervisors are busy, preoccupied people too, and may think that all is going well if you do not tell them otherwise.



### key points

Ask questions – any questions you want to ask – and keep asking them until you understand, until the matter is clarified or resolved.

## Resolving uncertainties

Simple communication queries may be quickly answered in class or even in casual conversation with your lecturer/supervisor at a chance meeting. If, however, you have more substantive enquiries, or indeed are having serious problems, you will need to take action to resolve these by arranging a meeting.



### exercise: resolution action planning

#### Step 1: clarify the nature of your uncertainties

Clarify the nature of your uncertainties before the meeting takes place by considering questions of this type:

- What precisely do I need to clarify or sort out (detail these)?
- Under what conditions do my uncertainties about writing/communication arise? Try to be specific.
- What outcomes do I hope for in a meeting with my lecturer/supervisor? Jot these down.

#### Step 2: set up a discussion agenda

Setting up a discussion agenda is a useful strategy when initiating meetings. When you have clarified precisely what you wish to discuss and reasons for doing so, (1) make a concise dot-point list for discussion (your agenda), and (2) give them a copy of your agenda before the meeting so that they have time to review your points.

#### Step 3: at the meeting

When you meet with your lecturer/supervisor, you want the discussion to remain focused on your concerns, not become sidetracked. These are strategies to help with this:

- If your lecturer/supervisor begins to digress (students do report this), try to re-focus attention on your agenda, those points worked out during the clarification process.
- Keep an eye on time so that you will be able to get through all the points on your agenda.
- You want the meeting to be helpful to you, so do not hesitate to say so if you are still not clear about the advice being given.

## Digital communication issues

Effective digital communication is key to dealing with your lecturer or supervisor. We cover some strategies for electronic communication below.

### Email

Email communication between students and lecturers/supervisors is popular, convenient, easy, and may afford a welcome degree of anonymity not possible in face-to-face conversation. It can be an appropriate and effective medium of communication and is preferred in the workplace over forms of communication such as Facebook. Still, where there is a choice of communication media (for example, face-to-face talk, office telephone or email), it is worth considering whether email is the best option given the purpose of your communication and a possible need for privacy. Certainly, issues do arise in terms of the appropriateness and effectiveness of email as a medium of communication between graduates and their lecturers/supervisors.

**Appropriateness** Most lecturers/supervisors will respond to emails, but do clarify with them the purposes for which email communication is to be used before dashing one off. Determine whether there are any restrictions on what types of emails they might welcome and when (for example, making an appointment might be welcomed whereas expecting written comments – let alone copious comments – on an attached draft might not).

Email communication may seem a less confrontational forum for discussing sensitive or difficult matters, but it may not be the most appropriate for resolution of these matters. It can be difficult to encode in written communication nuances of feeling, to achieve a fuller understanding without those non-verbal cues that can be so vital in resolution dialogue. Perhaps a telephone conversation or face-to-face talk might be a better option.



It is most important to practise self-censoring.

Avoid sending an email that may antagonize or alienate the recipient if you are feeling angry or upset. Sit on the email for a day or night until you have calmed down, and, as a safeguard against accidentally hitting the 'send' button, do not write in the recipient's address in the address line until you are certain you want to proceed. Think further about the wording of your email before hitting the send button, or maybe you should not send it at all.

Privacy or confidentiality can never be assured with email, and deletion does not mean final erasure. Emails can go to the wrong address, others may have access to the recipient's computer, the recipient can pass emails on without a sender's permission, or they can be retrieved from servers after deletion. So think twice about using this medium if confidentiality is a high priority.

**Effectiveness** The quality of the relations between you and your lecturer/supervisor will influence the effectiveness of your email communications. Where there is trust and openness, these should work well. But where tensions exist, particularly in a context of unequal power relations, email might not be the best choice. At least think about it.

The desired timescale of the communication can also affect effectiveness. Many students report frustration at delayed responses, or no response at all. This might mean that the lecturer/supervisor is away, that the email is not welcomed, that it has been accidentally overlooked in a hundred other unread emails (a big problem) or that the pressure of overall responsibilities has prevented the lecturer/supervisor from providing a timely response. A follow-up email may help, but not necessarily; you may still need to telephone or make a face-to-face appointment if possible.

Clarity of communication is also important. As with any written text, it is important to think carefully about readers' needs and overall text quality to ensure a message will be clearly understood by the recipient. It is easy for misunderstandings to arise with hastily put together emails, and so invite an unhelpful or negative response. Be aware that the online medium itself constrains development of the more task-sensitive dialogue developed in face-to-face communication, which is so valuable in negotiating understanding about textual production and settling on strategies for improvement. So bear this in mind if the email feedback seems somewhat brusque or even insensitive.

As a final point, where sensitive issues are being dealt with via email over time, keep hard-copy records in case there is a future need to review this 'conversation' as, for example, in resolving differences of opinion about what transpired in the course of events.

### **Facebook**

Social networking services such as Facebook today provide many people with their primary means of online personal communication. Although your lecturer or supervisor may have a Facebook profile, they may prefer to receive 'work' communications in the form of emails. Similarly, you may not wish your lecturer or supervisor to have access to your private profile. Discuss with them whether or not Facebook (or similar) is an appropriate means of communication in your situation.

### Mobile phones and texting

Just as social networking is popular as a means for personal communication, so too is communication via mobile phones, and similar questions apply as to their appropriateness or otherwise as a means of contact between teacher and student. Some lecturers or supervisors will prefer that you call their mobile phone, others will not. There may be limits around texting or the hours between which to call; of course, the same applies for you and your own preferences. Again, discuss the matter early on, so that there are no misunderstandings about what constitutes a fitting method of contact.

## Issues in cross-cultural writing and communication

Many of the writing and communication challenges experienced by international students are similar to those experienced by other graduates; so do review the previous sections. Nonetheless, it is unwise to assume that what has previously worked for you will do so now, and equally unwise to attribute all communication difficulties to a problem with English if English is a second language, perhaps even a third.

Cross-cultural issues of the following type can arise because of embedded expectations about teaching and learning and the conduct of relations between students and academic staff.

### Being critical

It will be expected that you take a fully critical approach to all materials being discussed in your writing and communication. If the need for analysis, critical appraisal and argument in writing is proving difficult and challenging, the section on 'Treating information critically' in Chapter 2 will help; also review → 'Building an argument' in Chapter 5.

### Developing independence

If you come from a culture where the teacher/supervisor is viewed as the authority from whom the student is to learn, you may expect your supervisor to direct every stage of your studies or research. A major expectation in Western universities is that students be self-directed, with *guidance* from a lecturer/supervisor. This is a crucial reason to talk through a supervisory relationship early, so that you are clear about what will be expected of you and what you can expect from your supervisor. Expectations can vary across supervisors.

## Accepting guidance

If you are returning to study from a position of authority and respect in your home country, perhaps as a senior public servant or academic, you may find it difficult to accept student status. Your adjustment in this case will invite strategies the opposite of those just mentioned. You might need to work at not being too independent, at accepting an appropriate level of *guidance* from your supervisor. Supervisory input is vitally important to ensure that the thesis meets the standards appropriate for the level of the degree, of which supervisors will certainly have the best understanding.

## Entering tutorial 'conversations'

You may find the tutorial meeting a somewhat strange affair, with everyone talking at once. Students may be perceived as disrespectful to the lecturer, and the tutorial unhelpful in providing instruction. But this is a matter of different cultural behaviour. Because of the emphasis on critical engagement, lecturers mostly choose not to provide answers, preferring instead to stimulate students to think for themselves by asking questions of them, allowing them to discuss issues as a group, to challenge each other's viewpoints and the lecturer's own, and to argue and debate at will.

Some international students can find it difficult to join in, being too polite to interrupt others. If you have this problem, ask for your lecturer's help. Try at every tutorial meeting to have at least one point from your reading you want to introduce into the discussion, and ask your lecturer if he or she could invite you to speak at an agreed-on signal. You will gradually become confident enough to enter 'noisy' tutorial conversations.

## Using the English language

Most graduates worry about giving tutorials, seminars or conference presentations (see → 'The nature of oral presentations', Chapter 11), though not all have the added burden of speaking in a language not native to them, so that pronunciation becomes a concern. Or it may be that English language/expression is preventing you from communicating clearly in writing. Explore these avenues of assistance to determine what help is available:

- Find out what writing assistance your lecturer/supervisor is prepared to provide.
- Investigate assistance provided by academic skills, learning or writing services within your institution.

- Ask an English-speaking friend, or some other appropriate person to run through your paper with you to practise pronouncing words about which you are uncertain.
- Search for helpful web materials or online services that focus on English grammar/expression/pronunciation (Purdue OWL is very good – Google it).
- Download pronunciation, grammar and dictionary apps to your smartphone or other digital device. Pronunciation apps, and some dictionary apps, will provide audio examples of correct pronunciation. When choosing a pronunciation app, try to find one that displays visual examples.
- Identify whether there are courses for credit in English for Academic Purposes that you may be able to take that fit with your schedule.

Most useful is to practise your English in context, meaning in situations where you are actually in the process of producing the various texts required in your degree, or preparing your presentations. While this type of developmental assistance will help you to improve your control of English, it will not necessarily extend to a full editing service – that is to say, fixing the grammar. Other second-language issues appropriate to context are discussed throughout this book.

### Using the disciplinary language

Effectively using the disciplinary language (as distinct from English) may also cause concern when writing and presenting, in which case visit the exercise under → ‘Mastering disciplinary writing practices’ in Chapter 2.

### Conducting interpersonal relations

In conducting interpersonal relations with lecturers and supervisors, you may find marked differences. You may need to be more proactive in asking questions, in negotiating the terms of, say, a relationship with your supervisor, in adjusting to different forms of address (for example, using first names), or in setting discussion agendas for meetings with your supervisor. If you are asked to do the latter, between meetings with your supervisor keep notes on the following:

- Interesting ideas about or interpretations of your readings and data.
- Ideas you have about your overall research plan.
- Suggestions for changes in focus or direction of your research.
- Any uncertainties about or difficulties with content or research procedures that need discussing.
- Anything else you consider important to discuss.

## Researching on the move

Mobile technologies are becoming increasingly central to everyday communication practices. Such technologies present students with new, more flexible ways of accessing learning content, increased opportunities for contributing to real-time debates in the field, and improved methods for data recording and distributing research.

### Advantages of using mobile technologies

#### Mobile phones

You do not need to own the latest smartphone to have access to a powerful mobile learning and research tool. The most simple of mobile phones today is equipped with robust data recording and playback functions, including a camera and voice and video recording; still others have the ability to record text notes. You can use these functions to record data *in situ* and to access it later at a more convenient time. Some institutions will send you important communiqués via text message to your mobile, such as emergency alerts or automated course information, so make sure you keep your contact details up to date on the student administration system.

#### Smartphone applications

If you own a smartphone, such as an iPhone, Blackberry or Android phone, then you have access to a myriad of ‘apps’ that can extend your study or research. Productivity apps can be accessed regardless of location to allow you to schedule events or tasks, retrieve documents or files and take notes. If you are an international student for whom English is a second language, then having instant access to applications for grammar, spelling and punctuation can be especially useful. Other apps that you might find useful include calculators, unit and currency converters, clocks and stopwatches, compasses, protractors and rulers and sound level indicators – just about anything that you might need in your particular discipline area.

#### Tablet devices

These touchscreen devices are finding a niche among students and academics who want an ‘always on’ computing appliance that is both portable and versatile. Tablet devices allow you to download and read ‘e-books’ and course texts, access files, write notes either by hand or via keyboard, and make use of many apps similar to those provided for smartphones. The advantage of a tablet device over a laptop is that it is considerably smaller and lighter in weight, making it perfect for on-the-go Internet access, data recording and travel.

However, its small size can also be a drawback: if you need a more powerful device, then you should invest in a laptop computer.

### **Laptops**

For many students, a laptop is their main personal computing device. As opposed to a tablet device, a laptop will do everything that a normal computer will do and thus provides a sensible middle ground for mobile study and research if you cannot afford a device for all occasions.

### **Voice recording**

Graduate students do not typically exploit the benefits of voice recording even though it is simple enough and you can probably do it with a device you have either on your person or in your bag right now, that is, your mobile phone or laptop. Voice recording can be used to make a note of ideas that suddenly pop into your head while you are walking to the bus, or to document conversations about course or research topics with fellow students. It can even be used to record lectures or seminars – with permission, of course. You can then listen to the recording in your own time and at your own pace, which can be particularly effective if you are a second-language speaker.

Some students use voice recordings as part of their everyday research activities, such as when they record interviews with study participants who are in their own environments or workplaces. In such cases, you will require a dedicated digital voice recorder, which typically has more storage space for voice files than, say, a mobile phone. Such recorders are small and unobtrusive and essential for certain types of fieldwork and research, but they come with varying degrees of quality: in general, you get what you pay for. Your laptop may also have the ability to record, but it might be too cumbersome to carry around and too intimidating to place in front of an interviewee.

Do remember that you will likely be in breach of privacy laws if you record someone without their permission, and/or if you upload a digital recording to a third party website – even if you keep the file ‘private’ (see → section ‘Keeping safe online’ later in this chapter).

### **Video recordings and photographs**

Quick video recordings or photographs can be taken on just about any mobile phone and can be effective if you need to chronicle more visual proceedings, such as performances, certain laboratory experiments, or any other phenomena that you encounter in your studies or research. The same principles apply for video recordings and photographs as for voice recordings: if you need a dedicated video set up, then be prepared to pay for quality, and do not post anything online containing someone’s image unless you have their express permission to do so.

### Podcasts and digital audios

A limitless supply of podcasts and audios can be found online, and many of these will be relevant to your study or discipline area. Take the time to search iTunes, iTunes U or other podcast directories such as Podbean.com, PodcastDirectory.com or PodcastAlley.com to find material to subscribe to or to download onto your MP3 player. Being able to listen to such material at your convenience can greatly enhance your comprehension of study topics and may give you ideas that you can follow up on later.

### Keeping safe online

As you make your way through this text, you will see that we advise you to use commercial online digital tools or services to support your writing and planning. Finding the right digital tools can greatly help you in your studies and research: they can increase your productivity, help you to visualize an argument, organize your research materials and streamline the writing process. However, it is important that you do not sign up for, or download from, sites and services indiscriminately. Here are some points for consideration before you sign up for anything online.



Exercise caution whenever you create an account with an Internet-based service.

### Copyright and intellectual property, including university regulations

When you sign up for an Internet-based service, you should be especially aware of the implications for copyright and intellectual property (IP), as you may be inadvertently giving away rights to material that you do not technically own.

**Copyright** Copyright laws vary greatly from country to country and are very complicated, but in general copyright automatically reserves to you all rights in any creative work you produce, such as research essays, theses and slide-shows. Reputable services will not ask for any control over your copyright, and any work or data you post to the service will remain yours, assuming that you are, indeed, the copyright holder to begin with.

As a student, you are likely to own copyright in any material you produce during the course of your degree, but this is not always so, as might be the

case if you have, for example, an industry scholarship. You should be clear about what you do and do not own in terms of copyright – it can be easy to assume that once you have created a work it is yours, even though someone else may actually own its copyright.



You need to check your university's copyright and IP policies to clarify what rights you have – and what rights your institution has – to your work.

**Intellectual property (IP)** Services are also likely to ask for a sub-licence to your IP (so that they can display your work). Both staff and students typically retain their intellectual property rights, but this varies from institution to institution, and some institutions will require an exclusive licence to any IP you produce under their auspices, regardless of whether you are staff or student, as might an industry scholarship provider.

### Terms of Service

Many of us create accounts with websites and Internet services without reading the Terms of Service (aka Terms and Conditions), even though we are asked to agree to those terms before signing up. It can seem tedious to have to read a lengthy screen of legal jargon, but there are a few things you should look for and understand before clicking the 'submit' button. Do remember, of course, that the Terms of Service can change at any time. Copyright issues have been covered above, but here are some further issues under the Terms of Service that you should be familiar with.



Make sure you understand, and are comfortable with, the privacy policy of the service you wish to sign up for.

**Privacy** You should be aware of how much personal information the service stores and to whom this information is made available. Many services allow you to keep some or all parts of your site 'private', but in effect this only means 'not publicly viewable', which may be perfectly acceptable to you in your situation. You need to ensure that you, yourself, comply with the privacy

legislation of your jurisdiction. In many countries, you are not allowed to give away other people's personal information without their permission, so if you upload a database of contacts to a third party you could be breaking the law.

**Data security** How will the service store and secure your data? Some services allow third parties to access your data, but only for the purposes of maintaining the service and only after those parties have signed confidentiality agreements. Other services are less scrupulous and will allow anyone who pays them (such as advertisers) to view your details. You should also see if the Terms of Service outlines how the service secures your data against unauthorized access or attack.

**Deleting information** Some services will delete data that have remained idle for a certain period of time. For example, if you have not accessed your account for six months, the service might automatically shut down your account or remove your material as a matter of course.

**Providing information to a service** You should only be required to provide a username, email address and password to create an account with any given service (some services do request a date of birth if there are minimum age restrictions on users). Even though there may be signup fields that ask for your address, ethnicity, hobbies, religious affiliation, or political beliefs, these should not be required fields and you should be circumspect about providing such details.

**Controlling email notifications** Better services will allow you to control the notifications or advertising emails they send you. If there is no way in your profile settings to turn off these messages, then you probably should not sign up for the service. In many countries, such messages are counted as 'spam' and are illegal if you cannot control receipt.

**Pricing** Many tools and services available on the web are supplied free of charge, even though they are provided by a commercial company. These companies often make their money through contextual advertising and by offering 'premium upgrades' to their basic services. If you do not want to have to pay for a service, then only select services that provide for free the baseline functionality you need. But, even then, be aware that some services may choose to start charging for their product at any time they like.

### **Considerations regarding the service itself**

The Terms of Service will lay out many of the conditions under which you agree to use a service, but that is not all you need to know about a company when signing up. If you think that you will be using a service in the longer term, then it useful to know a little bit about the business and its business

model. Technology industry websites such as Mashable.com and Techcrunch.com can be excellent sources of information in this regard, and they frequently comment on the remaining points now discussed.

**Business robustness and longevity** In the modern web environment, a company that is five years old is often regarded as well established and successful, but it should also have a sound business model behind it. For example, how does the company make its money? Who are its investors? What other sources of capital does it draw on? How many people does it employ? You do not have to become a business guru to understand these things, but you should have some knowledge about the company that is hosting your data.

**Reliability** All online services will have periods of time when users cannot access them, whether it is because the company needs to make upgrades to their software or hardware, or because a technical glitch has entered the system. Having said this, some services are more reliable than others. Visit the service's discussion forum (it should have a forum or similar) to see if there are complaints about the service's dependability. You can also gauge from these forums how satisfied users are with the service overall.

**Data lock-in** Regardless of how reliable or otherwise a service is, you do not want to sign up with a company that locks your data into it, and it alone. To this end, you should choose a service that allows you to export your data in a common format (for example, XML, OPML, RSS, depending on the type of data you are working with) so that you can transfer that data to another place if you wish.

### **Practicalities**

Finally, there are some practical considerations to take into account when using a commercial online service. These are items that are largely within your control and include the following:

**Public versus private sites** Many commercial services allow you control over who can and cannot view your material. You need to decide upon the level of visibility you want for your data. For instance, if you were seeking to raise your profile amongst the research community (see → 'Raising your profile: setting up an eportfolio' in Chapter 12), then obviously you would want your work to be public. If, however, you are using an online service to host confidential or sensitive research findings, then choosing a service that allows you to keep your work 'private' is essential.

**Back ups** If a company were to disappear overnight, would you lose all the data or work you had stored there? This is a frightening scenario for any graduate student, but it is one that can be mitigated quite easily by choosing

a service that (1) allows you to export your work so that you can keep a local back up, and that (2) exports that back up in a common format (see the earlier point about data lock-in). Even better is to find a service that synchronizes your data to your local hard-drive automatically, in which case you will not have to think about taking regular, manual back ups (see → the next section, ‘Backing up your work’).

**Help and support** Free web services are designed so that you do not need an instruction manual in order to use them as the instructions are typically built into the very design of the site. This is why there is usually no ‘helpdesk’ to call when you have an account with an online service. However, there may be times when you simply cannot figure out how to use a certain feature, or why your file did not upload as you anticipated it should. In these situations, you are expected to help yourself by searching the site’s FAQs (frequently asked questions) or forum, or by ‘Googling’ the problem and finding an answer elsewhere on the web.

**Bandwidth, Internet access and student quotas** The amount of bandwidth needed to support your online activities will vary, depending on the type of service you are using. If you are uploading large files (for example, video, audio or image-intensive slideshows) to a site, then you need a fast Internet connection – otherwise it could take hours. The same applies for downloading. You should also bear in mind whether or not you have Internet access all the time. This may seem an obvious point, but if you are conducting field-work in an area without Internet or wireless coverage, then you will not be able to access your online data (yet another reason for finding services that synchronize your data to your local device/s). And, finally, there is no point in using a suite of online services and tools if there are quotas on your Internet usage at your institution and you are likely to exceed those quotas regularly.

In the end, it is up to you as to what you sign up for or even if you sign up. The key point is to be aware of the issues and implications involved and to account for them whenever you are online. Digital data are different from physical data and having your work in digital environments exposes you to both risks and rewards – you need to be able to manage both safely. It is useful to keep in mind, here, what danah boyd [*sic*] (2011) identifies as being the four main characteristics of what she calls ‘networked publics’:

- **Replicability.** What you put online can be copied, forwarded, repurposed and reused in ways that you have no control over – but also in ways that might delight you!
- **Searchability.** Anything online can be sought and found, regardless of whether or not you have your site set to ‘private’ – there are always people who can find their ways around your privacy settings.

- **Persistence.** What you post online will be there forever. Even if you think that you have removed something from public view, a search engine is likely to have found and cached (archived) your material.
- **Invisible audiences.** You cannot be sure who is watching. Indiscreet comments or poor quality work may be read by unknown spectators – always be professional, just in case.

## Backing up your work

A final consideration in managing the modern graduate writing environment is that of backing up your work in electronic format. Much of your work, whether essays, notes, photographs, databases, or the like, will be in digital format and you must create back ups so that you can continue to access your material in the event of a computer crash or any similar incident that prevents you from retrieving your originals. Backing up, however, is not the same as simply ‘saving’ your work: backing up means taking a whole copy of a digital asset and placing it in, ideally, two different digital places, whereas saving your work means only that you have a single local copy of the latest version of the file you are working on.



Remember: backing up your work is your responsibility.

### Backing up the less obvious

Most students habitually back up thesis chapters or coursework essays but neglect to back up less obvious items such as photographs, databases, video collections, diagrams, lists of websites, electronic notebooks and, even, software packages. Anything that goes into the production of a piece of writing or research should be backed up. You should also keep copies of important emails and communications from your supervisor, lecturer or institution, as you never know if they may be needed. ‘Tag’ everything using keywords so that you can easily search for and find them later, or use a well-organized folder system to arrange your digital materials.

### Backing up online assignments

If you are required to complete an assignment online (such as via a wiki, blog or discussion forum), then it is your responsibility to have a back up of the

submitted version of your work, just as you would if you were handing in a paper assignment. If your lecturer has chosen wisely, then the service you are using for your assignment will allow you to export your material in a standard file format and keep a copy of it wherever you want (thumb drive, local hard drive, and so on). If being able to export your material direct from the service is not an option, then take an html copy of your work via your Internet browser. Simply go to File > Save As and save your work locally that way, and then create an external back up, just to be sure. You will be able to open and read a local copy of the page you have saved by opening it in your browser software.

### **Backing up regularly**

You should back up your work at least weekly as a matter of course. Set aside a regular time for backing up your work, for example Fridays at 5 p.m. However, you should back up more frequently if you have made significant or important additions to your materials: this might mean you are taking a back up once a day or even every few hours. Let common sense dictate when you need to take a back up, but remember that it is better to have a back up and to not need it than it is to not have a back up and to lose an entire month's work through poor back up practices.

### **Creating external back ups**

Having an extra copy of a file on the hard drive you are currently working from is not a back up; it is just an extra copy of a file on your hard drive. A proper back up exists on a different system or device altogether from the one on which the file normally resides. The most obvious and common way of creating this type of 'external' back up is to save your materials to a 'thumb' drive. These small drives are perfect for keeping files and folders that do not take up much disc space. However, if your work consists of larger files (for example, specialist three-dimensional design records or high-resolution images or video), then thumb drives are unlikely to hold everything you need. Invest in a large-capacity (that is, 500 GB, 1 TB or larger) external hard drive so that if or when your computer crashes you have a full back up of all your hard work.

Keeping your work online or, 'in the cloud' as it is also known, is a further way of creating an external back up; as long as you have Internet access, you have access to your work. It can also be prudent to burn your most precious work to CD or DVD, as this means you have yet another way of accessing lost work in a worst-case scenario. And do not forget that hard copies of your work also count as external back ups. Drafts of thesis chapters, for instance, can be printed out and kept in a filing cabinet just in case your digital data are corrupted. However you choose to keep your external back ups – and we recommend that you use a variety of formats – you should have at least two external back ups to have a proper redundancy in your back up procedures.

### Having back ups in different locations

There is no point in having two external back ups in the one physical location if that location becomes unviable due to fire, flood or other catastrophic event. Keep a back up of your work at home and in the office, or in another secure location, or make sure that your online back up is up to date.

### Using automatic back ups

As an adjunct to backing up your work yourself manually, you should also consider finding ways of creating back ups automatically. Numerous online providers provide this service at a cost (search for 'automatic data back up' or 'automated back up service' or similar), so do some investigating before choosing this option. Having said this, however, the advantage of using such a service is that an external back up on the Internet is created at the same time as your work is automatically backed up. If you have a Macintosh computer with 'Time Machine' facility, then make sure you have it activated with an external hard drive and schedule it to take hourly back ups. Time Machine automatically backs up not only your documents and files but your entire system, including applications and settings, allowing a crashed Mac to be completely rebooted from scratch and re-set to the latest saved version on your computer (or even to an earlier version, if you prefer). A final way of creating an automatic back up is to use an online folder or notebook service such as Evernote.com, Dropbox.com or Box.net that automatically synchronizes your local materials to an online environment, as well as across multiple devices if you so choose.



### further resources

Fowler, H.R. and Aaron, J.E. (2001) *The Little, Brown Handbook*. 9th edn. New York: Longman. Anything but little, but rather a valuable reference book that works hard to live up to its claim: 'answers all your questions about writing'.

Mainhard, T., van der Rijst, R., van Tartwijk, J. and Wubbels, T. (2009) 'A model for the supervisor–doctoral student relationship', *Higher Education*, 58(3): 359–73. An article describing the problems that can arise in a supervisory relationship, and presenting both a model for interpersonal supervisory behaviour and a questionnaire on supervisor–doctoral student interaction.

Swales, J. and Feak, C. (2004) *Academic Writing for Graduate Students: Essential Tasks and Skills*. 2nd edn. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press. An excellent resource for dedicated students for whom English is not a first language who are willing to invest time in exploring the intricacies of cross-cultural writing differences and learning how to overcome these to produce solid academic papers.