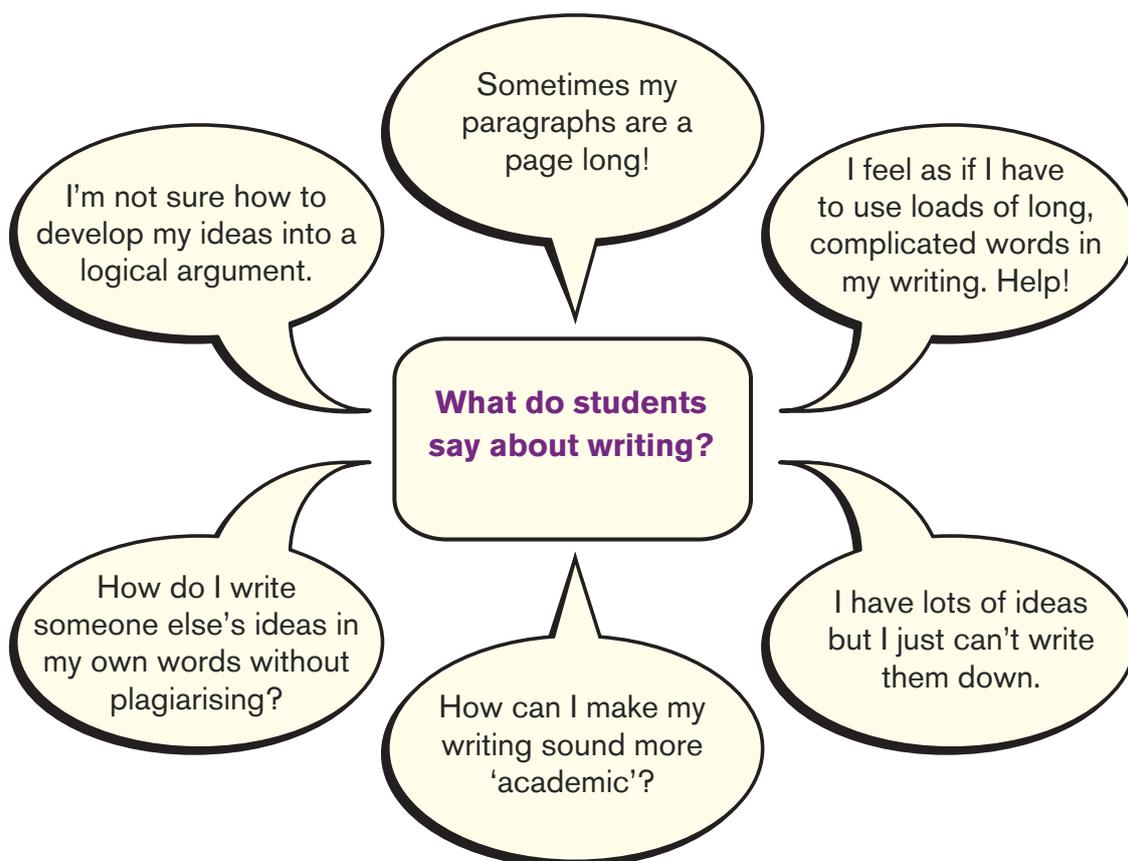


Stage 5

Writing your assignment



Writing your assignment



What is academic writing?

When you first start university, the term 'academic writing' may be a frequent topic of discussion for you, your peers and indeed your tutors. Often it is used with the expectation that you fully understand what is meant by the term. Primarily, writing at university is 'a way of confirming – to yourself and others – that you're understanding things' (Kirton and McMillan, 2007). This doesn't mean that you are expected to sound like a textbook, or even that you have to clutter your writing with long and complicated words. Quite simply, your tutors want to see evidence that you can express yourself clearly, concisely and logically. Often, this means becoming aware of your reader and of the need to guide them through your writing by offering clear signposts to each new idea you are developing.

It is worth remembering that writing is a process and not simply a finished product. You will continue to learn more about writing as you progress through your course. The important feedback you receive from your tutors will also help you to improve the quality of your work. The materials over the following pages offer you guidance on how to develop a range of writing skills which will extend way beyond your time at university.

Learning materials in this section:

- Structuring an introduction
- Structuring a paragraph in the main body of your assignment
- Structuring a conclusion
- Signposting sentences
- Ideas into sentences
- Writing in an academic style
- How to summarise, paraphrase and use direct quotations
- Using and developing new vocabulary
- Tips for writing when you don't want to write

Structuring an introduction

An introduction is like a guidebook to your whole assignment. It gives background information into your topic area and outlines all the ideas you are going to present. Remember that most introductions will be about 10% of the final essay and will include some or all of the following:

- **An introduction to the context or background of the topic** (you could include interesting facts or quotations)
- **The reason for writing about this topic**
- **Definitions of any complex terminology that will be referred to throughout the assignment** (definitions are not always necessary)
- **Introduce the main ideas that stem from your topic/title and the order in which you will discuss them?**

You may want to use the grid below to help you structure your introduction; you can use the right-hand column to jot down your own ideas.

| Structuring an introductory paragraph | |
|--|--|
| Introduce the context or background to the topic: Perhaps you could explain the title in your own words or use a quotation from an author who offers a supporting or contradictory statement about your topic area. | |
| What is the purpose of writing about this topic? Is there a problem or controversy with the topic? | |
| Definitions: Are you using any complex terminology or acronyms that need defining? Try to use a working definition from an expert in your subject area rather than referring to a general dictionary definition. | |
| Introduce the main ideas that stem from your topic: You cannot write about everything; for a 2,000 word assignment, select between 3-5 key ideas and introduce them in the precise order in which they will be discussed. | |

Structuring a paragraph in the main body of your assignment

What is a paragraph?

Paragraphs in the main body of your assignment usually contain a number of sentences which develop new ideas or expand upon existing ones. You may also need to construct paragraphs which offer contrasting views on the ideas you have already developed. A succession of well-structured paragraphs can help to create a coherent and logical argument. You need to consider the purpose of each paragraph:

- Is it developing a new idea?
- Is it expanding on an idea already mentioned?
- Is it offering a contrasting view on an idea already mentioned?

You may wish to use the grid below to record your ideas for each of your paragraphs.

| Structuring a paragraph in the main body of your assignment | |
|---|--|
| <p>An introductory sentence (this is sometimes called a topic sentence): This tells the reader the purpose of your paragraph and introduces the main idea you are developing, expanding upon or contrasting with another.</p> | |
| <p>Examples/evidence/quotations: You will usually need to include evidence that develops/contrasts an idea. This informs and strengthens your argument. Try and introduce your evidence clearly and remember to reference the source (either as a citation in the body of your text or as a footnote/endnote).</p> | |
| <p>Evaluative sentence/s: You may need to offer some explanation on the relevance of your examples/evidence/quotations. Why is this evidence useful? What does the author say that supports the idea you are developing? Does this evidence have any limitations?</p> | |
| <p>Concluding sentence: This draws together the main idea being made in your paragraph.</p> | |

Structuring a conclusion

Your conclusion is the final paragraph in an assignment. It must summarise (very briefly) every important idea you have discussed in your work as well as draw conclusions based upon the evidence you have presented. You need to make sure that you have directly answered the question. It is always useful to link your conclusions back to the essay title.

Tips to remember:

- Your conclusion will be about 10% of the whole assignment
- You should not include any new information in your conclusion.

You can use the grid below to help you structure your conclusion. The right-hand column can be used for you to make a note of your own ideas.

| Structuring a conclusion | |
|--|--|
| Summarise each of your points in the order in which you have presented them. | |
| State your main conclusions based upon the evidence you have presented. | |
| Link your conclusions back to the title – make sure you have directly answered the question and that you have clearly presented your viewpoint on the topic (you must do this without saying 'I'). | |

Signposting sentences

What are signposting sentences?

Signposting sentences explain the logic of your argument. They tell the reader what you are going to do at key points in your assignment. They are most useful when used in the following places:

- In the introduction
- At the beginning of a paragraph which develops a new idea
- At the beginning of a paragraph which expands on a previous idea
- At the beginning of a paragraph which offers a contrasting viewpoint
- At the end of a paragraph to sum up an idea
- In the conclusion

A table of signposting stems: These should be used as a guide and as a way to get you thinking about how you present the thread of your argument. You may need to adapt certain words and phrases for your own purposes. You may also wish to add your own sentence stems to the list below:

Signposting stems for an introduction

To understand the role of ... (your topic) this essay aims to provide a discussion of ... (the ideas you will develop)*

This essay seeks to investigate/evaluate/illustrate/discuss the impact of ... (your topic) in relation to ... (the ideas you will develop)

Firstly, this assignment examines ... (your topic) and its links with ... (your first idea) Next, it closely examines ... (your next idea) Finally, it focuses on ... (your next idea)

Signposting stems for a paragraph which introduces or develops a new idea

One aspect which illustrates ... (your topic) can be identified as ... (the idea you want to develop)

The current debate about ... (your topic) identifies an interesting viewpoint on ... (the idea you want to develop)

This first/next/final section provides a general discussion of ... (the idea you want to develop)

Signposting stems for a paragraph which expands upon a previous idea

Building on from the idea that ... (mention previous idea), this section illustrates that ... (introduce your new idea).

To further understand the role of ... (your topic or your previous idea) this section explores the idea that ... (introduce your new idea)

Another line of thought on ... (your topic or your previous idea) demonstrates that ... (introduce your new idea)

Signposting stems for a paragraph which offers a contrasting view

However, another angle on this debate suggests that ... (introduce your contrasting idea)

In contrast to evidence which presents the view that ... (mention your previous idea) an alternative perspective illustrates that ... (introduce your contrasting idea)

However, not all research shows that ... (mention your previous idea). Some evidence agrees that ... (introduce your contrasting idea)

Signposting stems to sum up an idea in a paragraph

This evidence highlights that ... (sum up your idea)

There is general agreement that ... (sum up your idea)

The strength of such an approach is that ... (sum up your idea)

Signposting stems for a conclusion

Clearly, this essay has shown that the main factors which impact upon ... (your topic) are ... (summarise your main ideas)

The evidence presented in this assignment has shown that ... (mention the conclusions you have drawn)

To conclude, this assignment has addressed a number of significant issues which show that ... (mention the conclusions you have drawn)

* The word 'topic' refers to the subject area you are being asked to discuss and is usually referred to in an assignment title or brief.

The 'idea into sentence' chart

What is the idea you want to discuss?

globalisation



What do you want to say about it?

it gives smaller communities a voice



Add the two together

globalisation gives smaller communities a voice



Does the sentence need 'framing' or introducing?

Firstly, this essay argues that



Add to your sentence

Firstly, this essay argues that globalisation gives smaller communities a voice



Do you want to add another related point? (You may decide not to)

it makes the wider economy stronger



Which conjunction would link the second part of your sentence best?
(and, if, but, so, which, thus, therefore)

and



Put your completed sentence together

Firstly, this essay argues that globaliation gives smaller communities a voice and it makes the wider economy stronger.

The 'idea into sentence' chart

What is the idea you want to discuss?



What do you want to say about it?



Add the two together



Does the sentence need 'framing' or introducing?



Add to your sentence



Do you want to add another related point? (You may decide not to)



Which conjunction would link the second part of your sentence best?
(and, if, but, so, which, thus, therefore)



Put your completed sentence together

How to write in an academic style

1. Create an objective, confident voice

Use the third person (this means not using 'I')

Most of the time you will be expected to use the third person as it enables you to show that you are being objective.

You could try using:

- This essay discusses the importance of ...
- This research shows that ...
- It could be said that ...

Consider your use of tenses

You need to be clear about whether you are discussing something that happened in the past or something that is having an impact upon the present.

The present tense:

- Smith's argument illustrates that ...
- Freud's theory supports the view that ...

The past tense:

- The Industrial Revolution had an impact upon society in a number of different ways.
- The interviews were conducted with a group of parents in the Leicestershire area.

2. Use appropriate language for your audience and purpose

Academic writing need not be complicated, but it does need to have an element of formality. Your choice of

words for an academic assignment should be more considered and careful.

Avoid contractions

- Rather than; 'don't', 'can't', 'it's', 'should've'
You could try: 'do not', 'cannot', 'it is', 'should have'

Use the full forms of words

- Rather than: 'TV', 'memo', or 'quote'
You could try: 'television', 'memorandum' or 'quotation'

Avoid using informal words

- Rather than: Smith's bit of research is ok.
You could try: Smith's research is significant because ...
- Rather than using words such as: 'get', 'got' or 'a lot'
You could try: 'obtain', 'obtained' or 'many'

3. Be clear and concise

Keep words simple:

- Rather than: *The denotation was obfuscated by the orator.*
You could try: *The meaning was hidden by the speaker.*

Aim for the right word for the right occasion:

- Example 1: *Crusade against crime*
- Example 2: *Campaign against crime*

The word 'crusade' has connotations of a battle and is more aggressive in tone than the word 'campaign'. 'Campaign' implies a more considered approach.

Make every word count:

- Rather than: *The theorist called Sigmund Freud wrote a significant piece of work called On Narcissism which offers valuable insights into ...*
You could try: *Freud (1914) offers valuable insights into ...*

Avoid any vague words or phrases:

- Ensure that your reader knows who or what you are referring to when you use words such as: 'it', 'them', 'they'.
- Words such as 'people' and 'ideas' have the potential to be vague. So, avoid saying: 'according to many people'. Ensure that you explain which people or which ideas.
- When talking about events that have happened in the past, avoid phrases such as: 'in the past' or 'in recent times'. You need to be specific.

Avoid using clichéd phrases:

- A cliché is a phrase or expression that is overused to such an extent that it loses its value. For example, 'as bright as a button' or as 'clear as mud'.

4. Use language sensitively

Avoid expressing strong opinions too directly. Academic writing is concerned with presenting your discussion in an objective way, so there is no need to assert your opinions too strongly.

- Rather than: *Smith has an extremely important point to make because*
You could try: *Smith's view is significant because ...*
- So avoid words like: 'very', 'really', 'quite' and 'extremely'.

Lean towards caution

We need to be aware that our views are contributing to a much wider debate surrounding your given topic. Your use of language must show that you are making suggestions which contribute to this wider discussion:

- Rather than: *'This view is correct because ...'*
- You could try: *'It could be said that ...', 'It appears that ...', 'It seems that ...'*

Avoid using taboo language

- In academic writing it is important not to offend your reader – you want her/him to trust your judgment and authority. Using swear words or making offensive comments will upset the balance of your writing and undermine your point of view.

Do not stereotype, generalise or make assumptions

- This especially applies to individuals or groups on the basis of their gender, race, nationality, religion, physical and mental capacity, age, sexuality, marital status, or political beliefs.

Your use of language should always remain neutral.

- Rather than: *fireman* or *policeman*
Try using: *fire fighter* or *police officer*
- Rather than: *mankind*
Try using: *humankind*

How to summarise, paraphrase and use direct quotations

What is summarising?

Summarising involves taking the main ideas from a piece of text and rewriting them in your own words. A summary is significantly shorter than the original text and tends to give an overview of a topic area.

Tips for summarising

- Highlight the main ideas in the text you want to summarise (do not include any minor details)
- Combine these ideas together in your own words
- Correctly interpret the original
- Do not include your own opinion or add extra information
- Use your own words and not those of the original author (unless using quotation marks)
- Remember to cite your source using a recognised referencing format
- Keep reminding your reader that you are summarising the work of someone else:
 - The author goes on to say that ...
 - The text further states that ...

What is paraphrasing?

Paraphrasing means to rewrite an author's ideas in your own words. This still means that you have to cite the original text. Often you are referring to a text in greater detail than you would in a summary. You may only be paraphrasing a sentence or two. Paraphrasing enables you to explore and interrogate individual ideas at a deeper level.

Tips for paraphrasing

- Read the text several times to understand the meaning
- Extract the main idea from the sentence and think about it on its own
- Frame the idea in a new sentence
- You could try and structure the sentence differently (try starting with the main idea)
- Now return to the original and make sure that the meaning is still the same and that nothing has been misinterpreted
- Remember to cite your source using a recognised referencing format

What does it mean to use direct quotations?

Using direct quotations means to copy an original piece of text word for word. To show that you are doing this, you need to enclose all the original text in quotation marks. It can be particularly useful to directly quote an author when:

- The author's style is clear and engaging
- The author's views support your own exactly
- When it is important that your reader knows exactly what an author has said about a topic

Tips for using direct quotations

- It is best to use small quotations as it means that you can make an evaluation on a single idea rather than many ideas
- Enclose the quotation in quotation marks (either single or double are fine, but be consistent)
- If you do quote more than three lines of text, indent the whole quotation (you do not need quotation marks when you do this)
- If you do not need to use all of the quotation, then you can use ellipses [...] to show that parts are missing

Using and developing new vocabulary

Vocabulary refers to the body of words known to an individual. When you start university you will be exposed to a range of new words and terms that may be unfamiliar to you. The key to learning these new words is to turn them from words you know (passive words) into words you use (active words):

words we know (**passive words**) → words we use (**active words**)

In order to make these new words useable, you need to learn what they mean and how to use them. One way of familiarising yourself with them is to produce a chart similar to the one below. An Art and Design student, for example, might produce a chart like this:

| Word | Definition | Context (use your new word in a sentence) |
|-------------|--|--|
| superimpose | Place or lay one thing over another, typically so that both are evident. | Blake superimposes fabrics to create depth and intensity. |
| art-deco | A style of decorative art characterised by precise and boldly delineated geometric shapes. | The art-deco movement evoked an awareness that pattern could be bold and daring. |
| | | |

Tips for developing your vocabulary:

- Read as much as you can, including text books in your field. Absorb the language of your subject and make a note of how writers in your area use language. What sort of words and phrases do they use? You could always keep a list of useful words and phrases.
- A dictionary and a thesaurus are useful tools to help you to develop your vocabulary. A good dictionary will provide you with a definition of your word and a guide to its pronunciation. A thesaurus will offer you a list of synonyms (alternative words) and can help you to expand your vocabulary.
- Try to gain some ownership over your new vocabulary by using it when you write and when you speak. It is not until new words are actively used by you, that the language is fully absorbed.
- To develop your understanding of terminology in your subject area, go to your subject text books for a working definition rather than a dictionary.

Tips for writing when you don't want to write

- Start by writing down any thoughts you have for your essay. This helps to get rid of the expanse of white page. (Remember you don't need to show these thoughts to anyone else at this stage).
- Try different approaches such as mind-mapping, flow charts or free-writing.
- Discuss your ideas with others in your group. Discussion can be a useful way of generating new ideas and also encourages you to see other perspectives.
- Try writing in a different location or writing at a different time of day. Make a note of which locations/times suit you best.
- Type out your topic headings, references or bibliography.
- Type out any quotations you think you might use.

An action plan for writing:

| | |
|----------|---|
| 1 | Consider your short term and long term writing objectives. Work out what writing needs doing now or in the next few days, and what needs thinking about for the future. |
| 2 | Make a timetable. This makes the workload organised and manageable. Work out what can be achieved in a day/week/month and be realistic about what can't be achieved. |
| 3 | Plan to write regularly. Short bursts of 20 minutes are often more successful and manageable. Set yourself a daily target; 200 words seem more realistic and achievable than a whole project or assignment. |
| 4 | Break big sections of writing into smaller parts. Focus on the individual paragraphs rather than the whole essay. |
| 5 | Finish your daily quota of writing at a point where you feel confident in what you are saying, even if it is mid-way through a sentence. When you return to your writing, it will not be so difficult to start again. |