

How to improve your academic writing

In a recent survey, academic staff at the University identified the interrelated skills of **writing** and reasoning as the two most important skills for **success** in higher education; when asked which skills students most often lacked, writing was again at the top of their list.

What is the purpose of this booklet?

Although the nature of university-level study has changed in recent years, not least because of technology, one element has remained constant, guaranteeing success to students with a mastery of it: writing.

In a recent survey, academic staff at the University identified the interrelated skills of essay-writing and reasoning as the two most important skills for success in higher education; when asked which skills students most often lacked, essay-writing was again at the top of their list. Needless to say, writing ability is also highly prized by employers.

The purpose of this booklet is to provide a reference guide to some of the most common mistakes in academic writing and to heighten your appreciation of the logic and beauty of language, a good command of which will help you to think more clearly and deeply, and have a positive impact on every aspect of your academic work, not just assignments.

The examples that feature in this booklet are adapted from an analysis of first-year academic work, covering all faculties. The analysis found that most students are making the same mistakes. The good news is that these mistakes can be easily corrected by learning some simple rules, and it is never too late to learn.

This booklet has been structured into two main sections: (i) Punctuation and Grammar, and (ii) Reasoning. These are preceded by sections on Structuring an Essay and Parts of Speech (essential reading if you have forgotten how to tell your noun from your verb). In addition there are also sections on Useful Tips, Commonly Confused Words, Writing Support at Essex, and Further Reading. It can be read from cover to cover, or can be dipped into with a specific problem in mind.

If you want to be true to yourself – to be faithful to what you really think by expressing yourself clearly and precisely – then you should care about language... irrespective of the fact that it will improve your grades.

Writing is at the very heart of academic life. Good writing makes a good student. This booklet provides useful guidance and helpful tips certain to set you on course to a clear expression of the plain sense of things, not only at university but in the outside world as well. An assimilation of its content will bring immediate benefits. I recommend that you read it carefully before you write your next essay!

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1. Structuring an Essay

Before we explore the micro issues of writing (grammar and punctuation), it may help to think about the macro issues, especially essay structure. While your grammar and punctuation may improve gradually over time, you can take immediate and easy steps to improve the way you structure your essays, for which the following may be useful.

Introduction

The introduction is where you provide a route-map for the reader and make clear how your argument will develop (see opposite). One effective approach is to outline the main issues that you seek to address in your essay. It may also be appropriate to explain how you interpret the question. *In size, the introduction should generally be no more than 10% of the essay.*

Main body

It is up to you to decide on the best way to organise your essay. Whatever you decide, make sure you adopt a systematic or logical approach that is transparent to your readers. Keep them informed about the steps in your exposition (the presentation of your viewpoint). You are not writing a mystery or thriller, so do not leave the reader in suspense until the end; make your argument explicit and make sure every paragraph in the main body of your essay links to the ones before and after it. If it helps – and if it is appropriate – you could divide your essay into sections and subsections, giving each section a subheading or summary in a few words; you can always remove subheadings afterwards.

Conclusion

The conclusion is where you remind the reader of what you have done – the main issues you have addressed and what you have argued. The conclusion should contain no new material. Your conclusions should be clear, leaving the reader in no doubt as to what you think; you should also explain why your conclusions are important and significant. As Stella Cottrell (2003: 154) suggests, it may also be a good idea to link your final sentence to the question contained in the title. *In size, the conclusion should be no more than 10% of the essay.*

Reference list and/or bibliography

Appended to your essay should be a list of all the sources you have referred to (a reference list) and/or a list of all of the sources you have consulted but not referred to within the essay (a bibliography). Find out which is required by your department and which referencing system is preferred; it may be that they require both, either separately or combined.

Tip

You should be able to sum up the basic opinion or argument of your essay in a couple of lines. It may help to do this before you start writing.

Tip

'However they are worded, all assignment titles contain a central question which has to be answered. Your main task is to apply what you know – however brilliant your piece of writing, if it does not 'answer the question' you may get no marks at all! (Cottrell 2003: 154)

Essay Checklist

1. Essay Title

- ✓ Does the essay have the full and correct essay title?

2. Introduction

- ✓ Is there a significant introduction that identifies the topic, purpose and structure of the essay?
- ✓ Are key words or concepts identified in the introduction?

3. Main Body

- ✓ Is there plenty of evidence that you have done the required reading?
- ✓ Have you put each main point in a separate paragraph?
- ✓ Are the paragraphs logically linked?
- ✓ Is each main point/argument supported by evidence, argument or examples?
- ✓ Are the ideas of others clearly referenced?

4. Conclusion

- ✓ Is the conclusion directly related to the question?
- ✓ Is it based on evidence and facts?
- ✓ Does it summarise the main points?
- ✓ Is it substantial (a paragraph or more)?

5. References

- ✓ Have you referenced all of your sources?
- ✓ Are all of the references accurate?
- ✓ Are all of the references in the essay shown in the bibliography and vice versa?

6. Layout

- ✓ Is it neat and legibly presented?

What is an argument?

You may have come across the term 'argument' in an academic context and felt confused, not fully understanding its meaning. Outside of academia, 'argument' usually refers to a disagreement. It tends to be an event; a physical occurrence. This may be the sense of the word that is most familiar to you, but an 'academic argument' describes something quite different: it is essentially a point of view.

A good argument (a 'sound' argument) is a point of view that is presented in a clear and logical way, so that each stage of reasoning is transparent and convincing; it will include evidence and possible counter-arguments. It may even help to make the assumption that the reader is in disagreement with you.

You will not only find arguments of this kind in academic contexts. Whenever you read a paper, or watch TV, or listen to a friend, you are presented with an argument – a point of view that has been articulated with the express purpose of convincing you of its validity or truth. Almost anywhere where there is thought and communication, there is argument; although the same intellectual standards and formal structure that are imposed in an academic context may be absent. The editorial sections of quality newspapers are a particularly good place to look for arguments.

When constructing your argument, the first thing to do is to read the essay question, then read it again. What does it ask you to do? Assess? Evaluate? Discuss? Compare? Each of these 'question-words' is different. Make sure that your argument matches the question-word. Once you are certain of your point of view, start thinking about the kind of evidence that would stand up in court.

2. Parts of Speech

Each word in a sentence can be defined by the role it plays. The different roles are known as 'parts of speech'. In order to fully understand the examples in this booklet, it may help to re-familiarise yourself with the basic parts of speech.

Verb

A verb is the part of speech that people tend to identify most easily. In schools it is known as a 'doing word' – an action word – which describes what the nouns in the sentence are doing, i.e. swimming, walking, eating, thinking, growing, learning, drinking, misbehaving. In the sentence, 'Sam studies in the library', 'studies' is the verb.

Noun

A noun is an object – a thing – such as 'team', 'girl' or 'car'. A 'proper noun' is the *proper* name of the thing (if it has its own name) such as 'Colchester United', 'Nicole', or 'Porsche'. Proper nouns have a capital letter. This shows that what is being referred to is the *proper name* ('Porsche') rather than the common or collective name ('car').

Pronoun

A pronoun is a word that is used *in place of a noun*, such as 'he', 'she', 'it', 'him', 'her', etc. Its purpose is to avoid endless repetition of the noun while ensuring that none of the meaning of the sentence is lost. For example, the sentence, 'Abdul is punctual: he is always on time for his tutorials' is much better than 'Abdul is punctual: Abdul is always on time for Abdul's tutorials.'

Adjective

An adjective is a *describing word* that gives the noun a quality that makes it more specific. For example, any number of adjectives could be used to 'qualify' the noun 'lecture'. It could be an 'excellent lecture', a 'long lecture', or a 'boring lecture' – 'excellent', 'long' and 'boring' are all adjectives.

Adverb

An adverb is a describing word, but *for verbs*, not nouns. For example, 'quickly', 'stupidly' and 'hurriedly' are all adverbs (they often end in '-ly'). They are used with verbs to make the action more specific, e.g. 'drink quickly', 'behave stupidly', 'work hurriedly'. In the sentence, 'the lecturer shouted loudly', 'loudly' is the adverb.

Preposition

Prepositions are words that describe the *position* and movement of the nouns in a sentence, such as 'to', 'from', 'into', 'out', 'of', 'in'. They precede the noun, e.g. 'to the classroom', 'in the lecture'. For example, in the sentence, 'After being pushed into the lake, I was stuck in the water', 'in' and 'into' are both prepositions; 'in' describes a position, whereas 'into' describes movement.

3. Punctuation and Grammar

'Punctuation shouldn't cause as much fear as it does. Only about a dozen marks need to be mastered and the guidelines are fairly simple. What's more, you can see the marks being well applied every day in the serious newspapers.'

Martin Cutts, *The Plain English Guide*, OUP, 1995, p.80

Although this section also covers grammar, misuse of punctuation is at the heart of many of the most common mistakes in writing. Good punctuation makes the relationship between words in a sentence clear, while also acting as a substitute for features of speech such as pausing and altering pitch and tone. Misusing punctuation can be like talking with a mouthful of food, obscuring and obstructing the intended meaning.

3.1. Bad syntax

'Syntax' is the technical word that is used to describe sentence structure. It is extremely important, as a well-ordered sentence makes meaning clear and concise, whereas a badly-ordered sentence makes the reader (and marker) work very hard to understand the meaning.

Student example: 'Although the current law for establishing whether something is a fixture or fitting can be argued to be rather messy and incoherent...'

In this sentence, the word order is, to use the author's own phrase, 'rather messy and incoherent'. A slight reordering, using the same vocabulary, makes the sentence much clearer and more logical: 'Although it could be argued that the current law for establishing whether something is a fixture or fitting is rather messy and incoherent...'

Playing around with syntax can transform your sentence. Think about the best way to

order the key words and phrases. If you are struggling to make your meaning clear in a sentence, try changing the word order.

3.2. Inappropriate use of tense

Make sure you use the correct tense – and be consistent with it. When you are introducing and discussing other people's opinions, use the present tense, e.g. 'Mills believes' or 'Mills claims' rather than 'Mills believed' or 'Mills claimed'. By putting them in the past tense, their opinions seem dated; it also suggests that their views may have since changed. It may, however, be appropriate to use the past tense if the person in question has been dead a long time, or was writing in a different era.

Student example: 'A few years ago, Robert P. Crease asked physicians what they think is the most beautiful experiment of all time.'

In this sentence, the author shifts tense. It starts in the past tense ('A few years ago, Robert P. Crease asked physicians...') then moves into the present tense ('... what they think is the most beautiful experiment of all time'). As well as being confusing, the statement could also be inaccurate, as the physicians may have changed their minds since they were asked. All that can be said for certain is that the experiment they identified was what they thought was the most beautiful at the time.

It is a common practice to use the future tense in introductory sections of essays, for example 'The purpose of this essay will be to explore...' or **'This essay will explore...'**. **The future tense can sound uncertain and unconfident, however: you can be more assertive by writing in the present tense, e.g. 'The purpose of this essay is to explore...'** or **'This essay explores...'**

3.3. Incorrect use of prepositions

What are prepositions? Prepositions are words that describe the *position and movement* of the nouns in a sentence (see Parts of Speech to clarify your understanding). They are very easy to use incorrectly, because they often seem to *sound right* in a sentence. The secret is to step back and think about each one and whether it is describing the right position or movement.

Student example: 'We have disconnected ourselves with our fellow members of society and no longer know the neighbours around us. There are so many of us now that we seem to of lost a sense of community and become strangers on our society.'

In this example, the author has used the wrong preposition in a number of places. In the first part of the sentence, he or she has misunderstood the relationship between the subject ('ourselves') and the object ('fellow members of society') of the sentence: you cannot 'disconnect with', as 'with' means 'together', you can only disconnect 'from'.

In the second part of the sentence, the author has made a mistake that is common in conversation: using 'of' instead of 'have' (i.e. 'we seem to of lost' – of sounds a bit like 'ave). If the author stripped the sentence down and took out the clause ('seem to') which has probably caused the confusion, the sentence would read 'There are so many of us now that we of lost a sense of community', which is more obviously incorrect. In the final part of the sentence, 'on' is used instead of 'in'.

Correct use of prepositions shows clarity of thought and a good understanding of the relationships between everything that is

described in the sentence. Think carefully about the position and movement of nouns in your sentences. Is so-and-so *in* or *on* this-or-that? Is this-or-that being taken to or *from* so-and-so?

3.4. Incorrect use of colons and semi-colons.

Colons and semi-colons may look and sound alike, but are actually very different. They can generally be avoided, so only use them if you are confident in your understanding.

Student example: 'This problem can also be seen in the following example; in a marriage both the man and the woman...'

In this sentence, the author has used a semi-colon where a colon should have been used. The aim of the punctuation mark is to join the two halves of the sentence together, which are: (i) a claim or statement ('This problem can also be seen in the following example') and (ii) the explanation, example or proof ('in a marriage both the man and the woman...'). Sometimes this use of a colon is referred to as a 'why-because' marker (Cutts, 1995: 83).

Semi-colons, on the other hand, are very different from colons. Any two statements (or clauses) that are separated by a semi-colon should (i) be able to stand alone as separate sentences, and (ii) be closely connected in terms of their subject matter. For example, 'There are a number of different uses for semi-colons; used in the right way, they can be extremely versatile'.

Crude as it may seem, the colon in the human body provides a very helpful analogy with the punctuation colon, particularly in the way it functions as a 'why-because marker' (note that colons can also be used

to introduce the following: a list of items; a contrast; and direct speech). Physiologically, the colon is the point at which one thing (here, food) becomes another (in this case waste). In the same way, a grammatical colon separates (A) the introduction of something, e.g. an idea or a claim, from (B) the explanation for that idea or claim.

3.5. Incorrect use of apostrophes

Apostrophes are perhaps the most misused punctuation mark of all. Described as 'errant tadpoles' (Cutts, 1995: 89), they can, if used incorrectly, completely obscure the intended meaning of a sentence.

Student example: 'The law does not specify other eventualities, such as a situation where a lost item falls onto a landowners land...'

In this sentence, 'landowners' should be 'landowner's', because the land belongs to the landowner. Apostrophes indicate ownership: 'the landowner's land' is another way of saying 'the land of the landowner'.

Correct use of the apostrophe shows clarity of thought and a good understanding of the relationship between the nouns in a sentence. Learn about apostrophes: they will help you to think more clearly and help your reader to understand and follow your argument better (see Further Reading). Remember the rule that the apostrophe generally goes before the 's' if the noun is singular (e.g. the dog's dinner meaning the dinner of the dog) and after the 's' if the noun is plural (dogs' dinner meaning the dinner of the dogs).

As well as indicating ownership, the other common use of apostrophes is to show that a letter is missing – that words have

been 'contracted' – i.e. 'It's nothing to do with me' instead of 'It is nothing to do with me'; 'She's been a long time' instead of 'She has been a long time.' As a general rule, contractions should be avoided in academic work.

3.6. Incorrect use of speech marks

Speech marks 'do exactly what they say on the tin': they mark speech. Nonetheless, they are still one of the most misused punctuation marks.

Student example: 'In 'The End of Education', Nils (2004) states that "the only thing that can save the UK education system is a complete overhaul..."'

In this sentence, the author has used speech marks (" _ ") instead of inverted commas (' _ '). In most disciplines speech marks should only be used when something is being said, not when something has been expressed in writing. The majority of quotations in academic work will therefore require inverted commas, not speech marks, though you should check the conventions of your discipline to confirm this.

The difference between speech marks (sometimes called 'double inverted commas') and inverted commas ('single inverted commas') is very simple. One way to distinguish them is to remember that speech requires the physical presence of two people, a speaker and a listener, hence it needs double inverted commas: "speech marks". When something is being referenced from a book, however, only one person is present (the reader) hence 'single inverted commas'.

'Most experienced writers rewrite their work over and over, refining their thoughts, finding a better way of saying something, making a long-winded section a bit briefer, or adding more detail to develop an idea.' (Cottrell 2003: 146)

3.7. Confusing singular and plural

Nouns always specify number, i.e. whether they are singular ('dog') or plural ('dogs'). As well as being consistent with the number, you must make sure that your verbs match your nouns (e.g. 'the dog swims' or 'the dogs swim').

Student example: 'The law of averages are too unreliable...'

In this sentence, the word 'law' is singular (i.e. one in number); if it is intended to be plural (more than one), it should be 'laws'. However, the author has used 'are', the plural form of the verb, instead of 'is'; the singular (remember 'the laws are' and 'the law is'). Nouns and verbs must correspond. The confusion has probably arisen from 'averages' being plural, but it is 'law' to which the verb refers. It should be, 'The law of averages is too unreliable...'

3.8. Using unnecessary words

One of the most significant differences you will notice as your writing improves is a reduction in superfluous (i.e. unnecessary) words. The best and most precise writing is often the simplest, as the author is in full control of every word. Always ask yourself whether each word is necessary and whether it is the best word you could use.

Student example: 'Being poor in society today it does not cause as many problems for the individual as it did many years ago.'

In the first line of this sentence, the pronoun 'it' is used in the place of 'being poor' (a pronoun substitutes a noun; see Parts of Speech). However, its inclusion is superfluous because the reader does not need to be reminded of the subject of the sentence. 'It' would be necessary to start a new sentence in which 'being poor' is still the subject, but in a single sentence it is unnecessary and confusing.

3.9. Using inappropriate or informal phrases

In recent years there has been an increase in the number of informal modes of written communication, such as emailing, texting, and instant messaging. These have contributed to a rise in the number of informal phrases that appear in more formal writing, such as the essay.

Student example: 'In 'The Repressed Imagination' by C. Cartwright, one of the topics he talks about is...'

In this sentence, the verb 'talks' is inappropriate and incorrect, because 'talking' is a very different action to 'writing'.

Student example: 'Basically, the policy aims to improve the quality of the service...'

The word 'basically' is becoming increasingly common in essays, but is inappropriate in the context of academic writing, because the purpose is not to reduce things to their most basic form but to explore issues and ideas in their full complexity and detail. Making something 'basic' is different to summarising. Terms like 'in essence', 'to summarise', or 'in short' are far more academic in tone.

Think about your everyday speech. However well you may speak, much of what you say, and the phrases you use, will be inappropriate for formal written work. Using the word 'talk' as an umbrella term to refer to any kind of communication is just one example of this common mistake. Think carefully about the words you use: what might they be implying by accident?

3.10. Not starting new sentences when appropriate

If you are unsure whether or not to start a new sentence, you probably should, especially if you lack confidence with colons and semi-colons, which can be used to make more complex sentences. If in doubt, keep your sentences as simple as possible. There is a famous saying, attributed to Epictetus, the Greek philosopher:

Do not write so that you can be understood, write so that you cannot be misunderstood.

Student example: 'The graph shows the results, after fatigue the score is generally lower. There are some anomalies, there could be many different reasons for this.'

In this example, both sentences would be less confusing if they were separated into two statements, either by full stops or semi-colons i.e. 'The graph shows the results. After fatigue the score is generally lower. There are some anomalies. There could be many different reasons for this.' Alternatively, the sentences could be rephrased so that each statement flows into the next, i.e. 'The graph shows that after fatigue the score is generally lower. There are some anomalies, however, for which there could be many different reasons.'

Remember that a sentence should usually contain a single idea or argument; likewise, a paragraph should contain a single theme or focus. Pay close attention to where and how professional writers start new sentences. Learn how to use semi-colons, colons, and commas so that you can form more complex sentences.

3.11. Incorrect use of commas

In a nutshell, 'commas act as separators between parts of a sentence' (Cutts, 1995: 81). To this effect, they often need to be used in pairs. The following is just one example of how commas are misused (see Swan, 1996: 468-470 for a comprehensive list).

Student example: 'Private problems, Mills believes can often be resolved outside of court...'

There should be a pair of commas in this sentence, not a single comma. It should read 'Private problems, Mills believes, can often be resolved...'. 'Mills believes' is a separate 'clause' and needs to be separated so that the sentence makes sense with or without it. Cutts (1995: 82) explains this nicely: 'A pair of commas cordons off information that is an aside, explanation or addition. Readers can, if they wish, leapfrog the cordoned-off area and still make sense of what is said.'

3.12. Mixing pronouns

A 'pronoun' may sound like something technical and complex, but it is actually very simple (see Parts of Speech to clarify your understanding). Always make sure that your pronoun matches your noun. Is it the right number? Is it the right gender? Is it first, second, or third person?

Student example: 'Because society is changing so rapidly it is easy to understand why one may feel he cannot cope...'

In this sentence, the author mixes the pronouns, moving from 'one' to 'he', which is very confusing for the reader. A better sentence would be, 'Because society is changing so rapidly it is easy to understand why people feel that they cannot cope...'

3.13. Inappropriate use of definite article

One of the most confusing things about the English language for some international students is the 'definite article' – otherwise known as 'the' – because some languages do not have articles.

Student example: 'To find a sense of reason instead of drowning in the depths of confusion the society bestows upon us...'

In this sentence, the second occurrence of the definite article ('the' in 'the society') is superfluous.

Although correct use of the definite article is a common problem among international students, it is also increasingly common among home students. Learn the difference between the definite article ('the', e.g. 'the house') and the indefinite article ('a', 'some', e.g. 'a house' or 'some houses') – you can

see why they are classed as indefinite or definite. Think carefully about whether you need to use one, the other, or neither.

3.14. Inappropriate or incorrect use of capital letters

Apart from in people's names, in titles, and at the beginning of sentences, capitals (big letters) should only be used if the word is a 'proper noun' rather than a common noun, i.e. if it is the official name or title for something (see Parts of Speech to clarify your understanding).

Student example: 'One day a teacher notices that the children start missing School and often arrive late...'

In this example, the author has used capital letters inappropriately. For example, in the case of school, the only time it should be given a capital letter is if its proper name is being referred to, i.e. Woodlands School, or if the reference is to a specific school. In the example, the author was not referring to a specific school. It is the same with the word 'department'. If, for example, you are referring specifically to your department, it should be 'Department of Psychology'. If you are referring to departments in general, it should be 'departments'.

Correct use of capital letters is quite easy to understand if you make the time to learn. Students often have trouble with capital letters in titles; of essays, publications, etc. However, there are set rules that are easy to learn and apply. Take the time. See Further Reading.

3.15. Using 'and' instead of 'to'

It is an increasingly common mistake to use 'and' instead of 'to', e.g. 'I want to try and learn a new skill' instead of 'I want to try to learn a new skill'. Objections to this particular mistake may seem irrelevant and old-fashioned, but it actually alters the meaning of the sentence.

Student example: 'One response of commissioners was to try and manage demand...'

In the example sentence, what the author actually means is 'to try to manage demand'. 'To try' is an infinitive verb (i.e. a 'to' verb) which needs an additional verb – in this case 'manage' – to qualify it. By using 'and' instead of 'to', the sentence is actually saying that there are two actions (two verbs) at work: the first action is 'trying'; the second action is 'managing'. Therefore, the sentence is effectively saying, 'One response of commissioners was to try and then to manage demand...'

3.16. Insufficient proof-reading

Always proof-read your work and always get someone else, such as a trusted friend, to proof-read it for you. Make sure you allow yourself enough time to do this effectively, i.e. leave a few days between readings so that you can read it with fresh eyes. Yes, this means doing your essays well before the deadlines...

Student example: 'Many problems relate directly to the lack of or lack of functioning institutions within society.'

Although this sentence makes sense, it could be misread as a mistake or typo (a 'typographical error'). The choice of phrasing ('lack of or lack of'), and the absence of

commas to punctuate the phrase, make the sentence very confusing for the reader. A pair of commas clarifies meaning: 'Many problems relate directly to the lack of, or lack of functioning, institutions within society'.

Try to develop your ability to read your work with fresh and critical eyes.

Empathise with your reader. It may help to read aloud to yourself; that way you can be hyper-sensitive to your punctuation, and test whether it helps or hinders the flow of your sentences.

mySkills

mySkills, the University's academic skills website, features advice, guidance, and interactive resources on all aspects of study. Developed as a joint initiative, everything that is housed within the site has been authored by expert academic and support staff from across the University. It has a large section on writing, featuring a short film in which students give their opinions and advice on essay writing.

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www.essex.ac.uk/myskills

4. Reasoning

Aside from the grammatical errors listed in the previous section, the most common mistakes made by first-year students in their essays arise from poor practice and decision-making relating to reasoning, structure, argumentation, and presentation. These have been grouped together under the umbrella of Reasoning, but there is also a separate section on Structuring an Essay (p. 2).

4.1. Poor structure

The most common mistakes that students make in their academic writing relate to structure, and, if asked, many lecturers would say that the structure is the most important element of an essay: without a strong, well-considered and well-planned framework – without a blueprint – it can be extremely difficult to stay focused and develop your argument. In most cases, you should have a plan or an essay outline before you begin writing. However, it often helps to just get your head down and write. This is fine – and a healthy practice! – but always have an organising structure, whether this comes a bit later or before you even put pen to paper (or fingers to keys).

Read Structuring an Essay on (p. 2).

4.2. Poor referencing techniques

To write well-structured and well-argued essays, it is crucial that you develop your ability to introduce and discuss the opinions of experts in your field.

Student example: 'In Wright Mills, 'The Promise of Sociology', he identifies several different personal troubles...'

In this sentence, the use of 'in' is incorrect and the use of 'he' is superfluous. It should be 'Wright Mills, in 'The Promise of Sociology', identifies...' or 'In 'The Promise of Sociology', Wright Mills identifies...' The subject (the author) and the object (the book) have been confused: they are seen as one and the same.

NB. Check what the conventions are for your discipline – it may or it may not be necessary to include date and title, for example.

Put aside a few moments to learn and master some easy techniques for introducing a reference or citation that you can rely upon and develop as you gain in confidence. Pay attention to how professional writers and academics introduce references in the published work that you read.

Many techniques are simple to understand and apply. For example, one common way to introduce a reference is: 'AUTHOR, in TITLE, argues [or claims or asserts or states, etc.] that 'QUOTE!..' e.g.

Yates, in 'How to Improve Your Academic Writing', argues that 'the majority of people have never been encouraged or have never found a reason to get passionate about language' (2008: 2).

4.3. Poor or unclear reasoning

Above all, perhaps the key to a successful essay is good reasoning, i.e. each sentence – and by extension each paragraph – flows logically into the next, building towards a well-reasoned and well-structured argument.

Student example: 'Different groups have different identities, ways of separating themselves from others. This leads to stereotypes. People misunderstand one another based on their appearance. This division between people is getting bigger and more problematic every day.'

Although this paragraph makes sense, a number of assumptions are made by the author, and the connection between each sentence is not always explicit, i.e. the sentences do not progress logically from one to the next.

Always check each sentence in relation to the sentence that precedes it to be certain that there is a direct relationship, and that the central idea continues to be developed.

4.4. Generalisations

Beware the generalisation! It is often tempting to get carried away and apply our idea or opinion to everything, but always be mindful of exceptions and counter-arguments.

Student example: 'Nowadays we are more able to examine ourselves from both a public and personal viewpoint. We were once dictated to, in our way of thinking, but now we are free!'

The author makes assumptions about time and place, both past and present, implying intellectual superiority over the past, and making a universalisation or generalisation about freedom of thought.

4.5. Speculations and assertions

If you are making a claim that could be disputed by the reader, make sure you use some kind of evidence to back it up.

Student example: 'Without the police force there would be anarchy on the streets and a huge increase in crime, which would result in more individuals being victims of crime!'

While this may be true, without evidence it is only speculative. It needs to be backed up with an example or research, e.g. when or where this was the case.

'Be emotionally neutral: most academic writing requires you to stand back and analyse dispassionately, as an objective onlooker.' (Cottrell 2003: 157)

If you are not sure of the difference between 'objective' and 'subjective', look them up. Objectivity is one of the cornerstones of academic practice.

4.6. Poor choice of vocabulary

Always check your vocabulary for appropriateness – and don't be afraid to use a dictionary. If you are using a word which has a number of different meanings and spellings, always look it up to check that you have used the correct form (see Commonly Confused Words, p. 18).

Student example: 'With some institutions becoming secular, such as religion and family...'

The choice of vocabulary in this sentence is poor, especially the use of 'secular' because 'religion' and 'secular' are opposites. Therefore, although religions can be disbanded or become defunct, they cannot become secular, as 'secular' means 'non-religious'. The sentence could be rephrased in a number of ways, e.g. 'With some institutions becoming defunct, such as religion and family ...'

4.7. Misusing or misquoting a well-known phrase

Only use phrases that you fully understand and know are appropriate in a piece of formal academic work.

Student example: 'The breakdown of the atomic family...'

The correct phrase is 'nuclear family', but it is easy to see how the mistake was made.

When possible, always get a trusted friend to read your work. I recently saw an advert for a car in which the seller claimed that, rather than it being 'reliable', his car was in 'good condition and very liable'.

4.8. Making indirect assumptions

Avoid making indirect assumptions. This can be difficult because it is not always obvious to us when we are being presumptuous, especially when we are trying to be open-minded...

Student example: 'Just because most tribes are uncivilised, it does not mean that there are no civilised tribes.'

Although the author intends to establish himself or herself as liberal and not presumptuous, the statement is premised on another assumption about 'most tribes' which is not backed up with data or literature. In addition, 'civilised' is also a problematic term to use because it is value-laden and subjective.

4.9. Inappropriate or inadvertent use of metaphor

In writing, we sometimes use metaphors without realising it. A 'metaphor' is the term for a literary technique in which something is described as being something else, for example, 'The moon was a ghostly galleon'. Metaphors are mostly deliberate and obvious; in the example, the metaphor reveals something more about the moon – it describes it, making it more vivid. However, sometimes poor choice of vocabulary can lead to an accidental metaphor...

Student example: 'We live in a time in which we are encouraged to question the world and its contents...'

Although the author may not have been fully conscious of this, he or she has used a metaphor that is inappropriate in the description of the 'world and its contents', as 'contents' usually refer to vessels or repositories, and the world is not a vessel.

5. Useful Tips

- ✓ In a nutshell, a good academic essay is *well-researched, well-structured, and well-argued*. However, you will only get a good mark if you answer the essay question (read the tip on p. 2). Similarly, if you have been allowed to choose the title yourself, make sure it is appropriate.
- ✓ Your target audience is an intelligent reader who does not know anything about the subject but may be familiar with the discipline and the main theories that are considered to be common knowledge.
- ✓ If you are expected to submit your work anonymously, *make sure you do!* However, make sure that you have identified yourself in the way that is preferred by your department, such as by student number, course code, etc. Make sure you are clear about this. Ask someone if necessary.
- ✓ The best academics usually have thick skins and have learnt not to take harsh reviews to heart (*Times Higher Educational Supplement*, 3-9 July 2008, p. 22); as a novice academic, it is the same for you. Feedback is intended to help you improve, so make the most of it; try not to rest on your laurels or get downhearted. Remember that the best writers work very closely with criticism and the editorial process (read the tip on p. 10).
- ✓ Make sure your work is presented in the house style specified by your department.
- ✓ ~~Don't use contractions.~~ Do not use contractions. Write in full.

- ✓ Avoid using 'you' and 'your'. It sounds too informal.
- ✓ Avoid abbreviations. Again, write in full. Use 'for example' instead of 'e.g.', unless you are using e.g. or i.e. in parenthesis.
- ✓ If you are using acronyms (i.e. NASA) make sure you write it out in full the first time you use it (National Aeronautics and Space Administration).

Some tips from George Orwell

from 'Politics and the English Language'

Be clear about what you are saying

'A scrupulous writer, in every sentence that he writes, will ask himself at least four questions, thus: What am I trying to say? What words will express it? What image or idiom will make it clearer? Is this image fresh enough to have an effect?'

Avoid using clichéd phrases

'Modern writing at its worst does not consist in picking out words for the sake of their meaning and inventing images in order to make the meaning clearer. It consists in gumming together long strips of words which have already been set in order by someone else.'

Avoid mixing metaphors: think

'The sole aim of a metaphor is to call up a visual image. When these images clash... it can be taken as certain that the writer is not seeing a mental image of the objects he is naming; in other words, he is not really thinking.'

6. Commonly Confused Words

A and *an* – whereas ‘a’ is used before a consonant sound (e.g. ‘a boy’, ‘a party’, ‘a situation’), ‘an’ is used before a vowel sound, i.e. before a word that begins with the letter a, e, i, o, or u (e.g. ‘an army’, ‘an old man’); some people also use ‘an’ before h, as it is considered to be a ‘weak consonant’. It is easy to see the practical reason for putting an ‘an’ before a vowel: try saying ‘a army’ aloud – it’s difficult!

Accept and *except* – ‘to accept’ means ‘to receive’ (e.g. ‘he accepted the award’); ‘except’ means ‘all but’ (e.g. ‘everyone except Peter went to the Summer Ball’).

Affect and *effect* – ‘affect’ either refers to influence (e.g. ‘his presence affected the whole class’) or emotional response (e.g. ‘he showed little affect’); ‘effect’ refers to result (e.g. ‘he had some serious side effects’).

Cite, *sight* and *site* – in the context of essays, ‘cite’ is the commonest of these three homophones (words which are pronounced the same but are spelt differently and have different meanings): ‘to cite’ means to quote or mention (e.g. ‘citing references’); ‘sight’ refers to the ability to see (e.g. ‘she had bad eye sight’); ‘site’ refers to a location (e.g. ‘the building site’).

Complement and *compliment* – ‘complement’ is used when something completes or finishes something else, or provides a balance (e.g. ‘the wine complemented the meal’); a ‘compliment’ is an expression of praise (e.g. ‘the lecturer complimented his work’).

Than and *then* – ‘than’ is used in a comparison (e.g. ‘Tim is faster than Tom’); ‘then’ refers to a point in time (e.g. ‘it happened then’).

There and *their* – ‘there’ refers to place (e.g. ‘over there’); ‘their’ indicates possession (e.g. ‘their pyjamas’ – i.e. the pyjamas that belonged to them).

Beware the Spellchecker!

Although spellchecker facilities in programmes such as Microsoft Word can undoubtedly be very useful, they can also create problems, especially with words that are commonly confused, such as homophones (words that sound the same but are spelt differently). A sentence with the wrong ‘there’ or ‘their’, or with ‘its’ instead of ‘it’s’, will go unnoticed because the word – although wrong – does exist within the language.

Make sure that your spellchecker is set to UK spelling, not American spelling, as there are a number of important differences. Whereas American English spells ‘color’, English spells ‘colour’; American English tends to use ‘z’ in verbs (e.g. ‘analyze’), while English uses ‘s’ (e.g. ‘analyse’). The following webpage may be helpful:

www2.gsu.edu/~wwwesl/egw/jones/differences.htm

Don’t ignore the grammar check. When a word is underlined to indicate that there is something wrong with the grammar, click on it and take a moment to read the explanation. This is a good way to learn about grammar. Sometimes you can ignore the rule: you will know whether or not to take the advice once you’ve read the description.

7. Writing Support at Essex

mySkills

mySkills is the University's academic skills website. It features advice, guidance, and interactive resources on all aspects of study. Developed as a joint initiative, everything that is housed within the site has been authored by expert academic and support staff at the University. It has a large section on writing, featuring a short film in which students give their opinions and advice on writing essays.

Student Support

Student Support have a number of Study Strategies Tutors with expertise in academic skills who you can speak to by appointment. They also run 'Strategies for Study' workshops throughout the year, so look out for related publicity or visit the website (URL below). The same workshops are also run specifically for students with dyslexia or similar learning difficulties. Themes include:

- ✓ Using University guidance and resources to support independent learning; Planning and managing your time effectively
- ✓ Selective and wider reading; Note-taking formats; Referencing and Plagiarism
- ✓ When, how and who to ask for help; Peer study groups
- ✓ Keeping track of what works for you: reviewing, revising and enjoying your study

Workshops are generally scheduled on Wednesdays. Visit the website for up-to-date timetables and for more guidance and services.

www2.essex.ac.uk/stdsup/welfare/workshops.shtm

There are many, many services and opportunities on campus, so make sure you take advantage of them. Ask Student Support what's available.

Writing Fellows

The University is fortunate enough to have two Writing Fellows from the Royal Literary Fund who are available to give one-to-one advice on the practical aspects of writing, whether for academic purposes or for pleasure. The Fellows are based in the Department of Literature, Film, and Theatre Studies (LiFTS) in room 5A.223, but are available to students and staff from all departments, across all years of study. Go to room 5A.201 in the LiFTS Department to book an appointment.

Writing Group

If you are experiencing difficulties in writing or generally find the process difficult, even if you have no immediate assignment deadlines, the Writing Group offers a safe and non-judgemental environment in which to discuss writing. E-mail: writinggroup@essex.ac.uk

OWLs (Online Writing Labs)

There are a number of writing resources on the web that are very good, known as OWLs. These are three of the best. The OWL at Purdue was the original.

Bowling Green State University

www.bgsu.edu/offices/acen/writingctr/page29232.html

Purdue University

<http://owl.english.purdue.edu/handouts/grammar/>

Grammar Bytes

www.chompchomp.com/

8. Further Reading

You may find the following books helpful. Those with an asterisk (*) were used in compiling this booklet. Those with a hash (#) are strongly recommended.

Burchfield, R. W., *The New Fowler's Modern English Usage*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1996.

Butcher, J., *Copy-editing: The Cambridge handbook*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1981.

Cook, C. K., *Line by Line: How to edit your own writing*, Houghton Mifflin Company, Boston, 1985.

Cottrell, S., *The Study Skills Handbook*, Palgrave, 2nd edition, 2003. *

Cutts, M., *The Plain English Guide*, Oxford University Press, 1995. * #

Evans, H. (ed. Crawford, G.), *Essential English: For journalists, editors and writers*, Pimlico, 2nd revised edition, 2000.

Fowler, H. W. & Fowler, F. G., *The King's English*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1973.

Hilton, C. & Hyder, M., *Getting to Grips with Punctuation and Grammar*, BPP (Letts Educational) Ltd, London, 1992.

Hilton, C. & Hyder, M., *Getting to Grips with Spelling*, BPP (Letts Educational) Ltd, London, 1992.

Northedge, A., *The Good Study Guide* (New Edition), The Open University, 2005. *

Orwell, G., 'Politics in the English Language' in *Why I Write*, Penguin Books, 2004. * #

Partridge, E., *Usage and Abusage: A guide to good English*, Hamish Hamilton, London, 6th edition, 1965.

Partridge, E., *You Have a Point There: A guide to punctuation and its allies*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1983.

Ritter, R. M., *New Hart's Rules: The handbook of style for writers and editors*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2005.

Strunk, W., *The Elements of Style*, Filiquarian Publishing, LLC, 2006. * #

Swan, M., *Practical English Usage*, Oxford University Press, 2nd edition, 1995. *

Truss, L., *Eats, Shoots & Leaves*, Profile Books, 2007. * #

The Economist, *Pocket Style Book*, Economist Publications, London, 1986. #

The University of Chicago Press, *A Manual of Style*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 12th edition, 1969.

Produced by the Learning and Teaching Unit. Printed on recycled paper.

If you have questions regarding the booklet, please contact Richard Yates.

