Writing Skills Workshop II

Principles of Academic Writing

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What is the nature academic writing?

Academic writing is a genre of writing with its own conventions. This means that academic writers employ specific literary techniques which have been established by general consent and usage by the international scholarly community. As members of that scholarly community, we need to become familiar with these literary practices so that we can effectively communicate our research in a language that is acceptable to our readers. In this workshop we will be exploring such things as:

Mastering academic writing practices

- Paragraph construction
- Using precise and direct language
- Sentence structure
- Selecting reporting tenses/verbs
- Style and tone

This workshop booklet is organized in such a way as to be a useful reference for your future writing. In addition to the instructional material, it provides practical exercises, some of which we will attempt in the workshop. Our aim today is to develop your ‘writing muscles’. Writing is like physical or artistic activities such as football, ballet or playing the piano; you need to first learn the rules, and then perfect your skills through practice. You also need the appropriate ‘muscles’ for the activity, and these will only come through hours of exercise.

The techniques that you learn today can be applied to the writing of dissertations, or when writing for publication, such as in academic journals or books (which is an important aim for all serious researchers!). The following material focuses on some of the most important characteristics or principles of academic writing. Understanding these will help in the editing process.

Mastering writing practices I: Paragraph construction in academic writing

Paragraphs ‘break up’ the information you want to present to your reader, structuring it in such a way that guides the reader through a series of related ideas. Paragraphs are a structural feature of academic texts and are subject to established conventions and expectations.

Academic paragraphs follow what is known as a ‘general-to-specific’ sequence whereby they begin with a general (or topic) sentence and become increasingly focused on information which contributes to your argument.
Well organized paragraphs in academic writing should contain:

A **topic sentence** appears at the beginning of the paragraph. The topic sentence the main idea you wish to explore in the paragraph. It usually takes the form of a broad, general statement or assertion.

The topic sentence is followed by an **explanatory or ‘supporting’ sentence**. The function of an explanatory sentence is to explain, elaborate on or focus the main idea you have introduced in the topic sentence. The explanatory sentence is also sometimes called a ‘controlling idea’ because it directs the discussion to a specific area of concern. For example,

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic sentence</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>At the beginning of semester, college students need to register for their classes. However, this can be a frustrating experience for new students who do not understand the current registration system.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Explanatory sentence or controlling idea</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Following the controlling idea are a group of sentences called <strong>supporting sentences</strong>. They are called supporting sentences because they provide evidence to support (or in some cases refute) the controlling idea. Supporting details may include examples, statistics, citations from published research and quotations. The supporting details serve to strengthen your argument; they persuade the reader of the validity of your reasoning!</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| At the beginning of semester, college students need to register for their classes. However, this can be a frustrating experience for new students who do not understand the current registration system. |
For example the results of a national youth survey aimed at understanding the challenges in making the transition from high school to college show that 65% of new students have difficulty in navigating complex registration procedures (Harris & Jones 2006). Data from our own research with administrative staff at Newman College confirms these findings. For instance the manager of student services remarked that ‘the procedures we currently have in place to register students are confusing because the course code don't resemble the course title'. |

Finally, academic paragraphs include a concluding sentence that summarises or rounds off the points made in the paragraph and leads into the next paragraph. This final sentence is also known as a 'summarising transition'. Here is an example of a concluding sentence for the paragraph above:

**Last sentence of the paragraph**

Whilst it is clear that the practice of using course codes is making registration problematic for some students, is it the primary reason for their difficulties?

**Possible first sentence of the next paragraph**

Thomson (2007) in her analysis of registration protocols in Scottish colleges, found that students became anxious when faced with complicated on-line enrolment procedures.
Mastering writing practices II: Use simple, clear and direct language

The take home message here is be brief or use an economy of words; ‘write to express not to impress’.

The main point of writing something for someone else to read is to get your message across clearly and directly. The best way to achieve this is to adopt a particular attitude of mind. The attitude is that you want to communicate your ideas and research – not to impress your reader with the richness of your prose. There are several techniques for achieving clarity and directness in your writing:

Keep your sentences on the short side

It is a good idea to construct your sentences tightly. When a writer tries to pack too much information into one sentence it increases the density and reduces the readability of the work. This is likely to reduce the clarity of the message and confuse the reader. The rule of thumb is to keep most sentences short – 12-20 words maximum. But vary the length and structure to avoid sounding choppy.

Let’s consider the ‘standard’ sentence; or the sentence in its simplest form. The standard sentence consists of one main clause (or one idea) consisting of a subject and a predicate.

For example:

- The dog + *barked*
- The dog + *bit* + the postman
- The dog + *was* + vicious

The standard sentence conveys a clear and simple message; however, there are many occasions where we want to enrich a sentence by adding specific details. To do this we must expand the basic sentences by adding modifying statements which give additional information. These modifying statements are called dependent clauses. For example:
The dog barked because it heard the rattle of the postman’s bicycle.

Independent clause and dependent clause linked by a coordinating conjunction (such as and; but; nor; for; yet; because).

On hearing the rattle of the bicycle, the vicious dog barked before biting the postman on the leg.

Independent clause and two dependent clauses linked by a comma and then a coordinating conjunction (such as and; but; nor; for; yet; because).

Here we have examples of sentences with one and then two dependent clauses. As a rule, it is better to not construct a sentence which has more than two dependent clauses. If you do, the information becomes too dense and it will be difficult for the reader to absorb the volume of information you are trying to communicate.

So, as a rule of thumb, avoid complicated sentence structure. Use simple sentences that have no more than two dependent clauses. This means that your sentences will or should rarely have more than approximately 24 words.

Exercise: A lack of clarity occurs when a writer tries to pack too much information into one sentence. The following example below illustrates this problem. Read the sentence below and simplify it by: 1). Distributing the clauses into two or more sentences; and 2). Omitting redundant material.

Last month while I was visiting the federal buildings in Washington on a guided tour, we went to the National Art Gallery, where we had been for an hour when the rest of the group was ready to move on to the Treasury Building and I told my friend with the group that I wanted to stay in the Art Gallery a while longer and I would rejoin the group about half an hour later, but I never did, even though I moved more quickly than I wanted to from room to room, not having seen after about four hours all that there was to see. (106 words)

Sentences to Avoid

Choppy Sentences – are sentences that are too short. Short sentences can be effective in certain situations. However, overuse of short sentences is considered poor style in academic writing. Choppy sentences are easy to correct. Just combine two or three short sentences to make one compound or complex sentence.
**Example:**

1). Wind is an enduring source of power. Water is also an unlimited energy source. Dams produce hydraulic power. They have existed for a long time. Windmills are relatively new.

2). Both wind and water are enduring sources of power. Dams have produced hydraulic power for a long time, but windmills are relatively new.

**Stringy Sentences** – are sentences with too many clauses, usually connected with a coordinating conjunction. It often results from writing the way you speak, going on and on like a string without an end.

**Example:**

1). Many students attend classes all morning, and then they work all afternoon, and they also have to study at night so they are usually exhausted by the weekend.

2). Many students attend classes all morning and work all afternoon. Since they also have to study at night, they are usually exhausted by the weekend.

**Run-on Sentences** – are sentences in which two or more independent clauses are written one after another with no punctuation.

**Example:**

1). My family went to Australia then they emigrated to Canada.

2). My family went to Australia, [: or .] then they emigrated to Canada.

**Sentence Fragments** – are incomplete sentences or parts of sentences. Remember that a complete sentence must contain at least one main or independent clause.

**Example:**

1). Because some students work part-time while taking a full load of classes.

2). Because some students work part-time while taking a full load of classes, they have little free time. (Alternatively you could drop the subordinator because)

**Parallelism**

Parallelism is important when you are listing and comparing and contrasting ideas or items. Parallelism means that each item in a list or comparison follows the same grammatical pattern. For instance if you are writing a list and the first item in your list is a noun, write all the following items as nouns. If the first item is an –*ing* word, make all the others –*ing* words.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Not Parallel</th>
<th>Parallel</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>My English conversation class is made up of Chinese, Spaniards, and some from Bosnia.</td>
<td>My English conversation class is made up of Chinese Spaniards and Bosnians. (The items are all nouns)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The students who do well attend class, they do their homework, and practice speaking English in class</td>
<td>The students who do well attend class, do their homework, and practice speaking in English (These items are all verbs + complements).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The teacher wanted to know which country we came from and our future goals.</td>
<td>The teacher wanted to know which country we came from and what our future goals were (The items are both noun clauses).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Exercises:**

The disadvantages of using a credit card are overspending and you pay high interest rates.

Credit cards are accepted by department stores, airlines, and they can be used in some gas stations.

You do not need to risk carrying cash or to risk to miss a sale.

With credit cards, you can either pay your bill with one check, or you can stretch out your payments.

**Use an economy of words and avoid redundant phrases: ‘low fat writing’**

Economy, in this context, refers to the relation between the number of words used and the meaning they convey. As a rule of thumb it is better to leave out extra words that do not add any significant information. If you include in your writing meaningless -- that is ‘redundant’ - words and phrases, you will only succeed in making the reading more difficult and annoying the reader (because all you are doing is producing a useless repetition of the same idea in different words). This is often referred to as ‘wordiness’.

Conciseness is the opposite of wordiness, taking too many words to say what you want to say. It is a practice that ‘pads’ the writing, so much so as to obscure main points. Excess wordiness takes up valuable space that can be put to better use, such as bringing in more points or evidence to support an argument.
How can you develop conciseness?

By eliminating redundant words and phrases
If your thesis supervisor or peer reviewers feel that your writing is 'wordy' then you may be guilty of using unnecessary words. For example:

| I would like to make it entirely clear to one and all that neither I nor any of my associates or fellow workers had anything at all to do in any way, shape or form with this illicit and legally unjustifiable act that has been committed. | I want to make it clear to everyone that neither I nor any of my associates had anything to do with this illegal act. |

In the above example the version at the left takes forty-six words to say what is more clearly said in twenty-four. When we are constructing sentences it is useful to consider eliminating redundant words and phrase. Empty words are everywhere in our writing – part of the point of editing is to find and eliminate them.

BE POWERFUL! (not flabby) Don't start sentences with 'there is/are' or 'it is'.

Here are some examples of how to do this.

Example

*By way of response*, he said he would think about it.

*With reference to your question*, I think we should accept the invitation.

*It seems unnecessary to point out* that I was in Sydney at that time.

She looked *as though she was* angry.

*As we walked in the direction of home, I felt* as if I had never been happier

Qualifying absolutes

Many words have a fixed or absolute meaning. That is they can stand alone, without being qualified. *Delicious* for instance has a definite or fixed meaning and can stand alone. *Very delicious* is qualifying an absolute.

*Other examples:*

Definite decision

Absolutely essential
Actively consider

Brief moment

**Distinctions without difference**
These are two words that basically mean the same thing.

Listening to complaints is *tedious* and *tiresome*.

He was *lanky* and *tall*.

He spoke *tersely* and *concisely*.

We made a *thoughtful* and *careful* study.

She is *honest* and *truthful*.

The idea is *speculative* and *conjectural*.

**Tautologies**
A tautology repeats a meaning already expressed – saying the same things using different words.

It had a *sweet, sugary* taste.

This is a *new innovation*.

We must render *helpful assistance*.

His conversation was *empty* and *vacuous*.

**Precision and the elimination of vagueness**
Precision is an important consideration in academic writing. Precision relates to the choice of words that best allows you to communicate your meaning to the reader.

Precision is best achieved through the elimination of vagueness. Words are vague when they do not convey to a reader one specific meaning. Consider this sentence:

I could tell by the *funny* look on her face that she was *mad*.

Words like *funny* and *mad* belong to a group called ‘utility words’; that is words that have either no specific meaning or can be applied to a number of contexts. For instance, what does mad mean here? It could mean insane, angry, annoyed, irritated or offended. The reader cannot be sure; however the writer can remove any doubt by using more specific diction. For example:

I could tell by the *way her face stiffened* that she was *offended*. 
Here are some further examples:

**Examples:**

- *puzzling*
  It was a peculiar statement.
  - weaken confidence in
  Such scandals are bad business for politicians
  - seriously ill
  He is in bad shape
  - terminal cancer
  Her father has an incurable disease

**Exercises: Substitute more specific diction for the utility words to give a more precise meaning**

- He is a doctor, but I don’t know what his line is.
- Our organisation is opposed to Brenda Ames for student president.
- It was a smooth party – nice people, lovely food and marvellous conversation.
- What a terrific surprise to meet so many cool people at the same affair.
- The actors gave a swell performance.
- The judge said the matter was peculiar but she would take it under advisement.

**Dates and periods of time**

Similarly, always state precise dates rather than ‘currently’, ‘recently’, ‘in the last fifteen years’ or ‘two decades ago’. Your thesis/article/book could be read many years from now, but who then will know when now is? So ‘currently’ becomes ‘in the 2000s’; ‘recently becomes ‘from 2000-2005’; ‘in the last fifteen years’ becomes 1990-2005; ‘two decades ago becomes 1985.

**Selecting reporting tenses and verbs**

While the verb tense you select may be governed by disciplinary practice, consistency in usage remains important. Use:

- Either: The present tense or present perfect tense (these two tenses are interchangeable) – Smith argues or Smith has argued.
- Or: The past tense – Smith argued.
Both present and past tense should not be used randomly in a single text.

**Reporting verbs**

Reporting verbs tend to have subtle effects in conveying your attitude towards (in particular) your sources. This is termed the *modality* of assertions. For example the skilful use of reporting verbs serves in part to position the reader to respond to your text in certain ways. The examples below should help you to have an appreciation of this point and provide a range of choices (see also handout).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Words that convey a neutral attitude</th>
<th>Points out/ suggests/ indicates/ describes/ observes/ comments/ remarks/ reports</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Words that convey a degree of uncertainty</td>
<td>Alleges/ declares/ speculates/ postulates/ contends/ claims/ asserts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Words that imply agreement</td>
<td>Establishes/ affirms/ confirms/ proves/ convinces/ demonstrates/ shows</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Words that stress a strong negative or positive attitude</td>
<td>Refutes/ discards/ stresses/ advocates/ proposes/ urges/ declares/ contradicts/ challenges</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Style and tone**

**Impersonal (3rd person) and personal (1st person) voice**

The impersonal mode of the third person ‘it’ is often preferred over the first person ‘I’ in academic writing. The third person is often thought to sound more objective, to confirm the idea of researcher as detached observer. Yet students from different disciplines, even the sciences, do use the personal ‘I’, albeit generally with restraint.

For instance you may choose not to use ‘I’ in the body of the text, although you may choose to use it in the parts of the introduction that deal with topic focus, research question(s) or objective(s) and description of the overall structure of the thesis.

*Question for discussion: What are the arguments for and against use of the personal, 1st person ‘I’ in the writing of research?*
Language differences in formal, standard and informal registers

Writers use different forms of language on different occasions, depending upon its appropriateness. For example the language one would use in writing a letter to apply for a job would be different than that used when writing a note or email to one's friends.

Basically we can say there are clear differences in the complexity (words chosen and grammatical constructions) of language depending on context. In academic writing we generally adopt a **formal register**. This is a formal way of writing which emphasizes authority, turns actions into abstractions and keeps readers at an arms length. For instance:

*In discussions yesterday, the Federal Cabinet focused on the formulation of amendments to workers' compensation.*

The language of the **standard register** is a mix of the formal and everyday, Writers in the standard register reduce the density of their language and in so doing gain greater clarity. For instance the sentence above becomes:

*Cabinet ministers yesterday discussed how to word changes to the laws on workers’ compensation.*

Finally, there is the informal register. The casual nature of the informal register is achieved at some cost to important aspects of communication such as precision. The formal register, for example, sometimes employs colloquialisms which have limited social and regional currency. For instance the sentence above becomes:

*Yesterday, Canberra pollies worked on the new workers’ comp laws.*

Mastering Writing Practices III: Paraphrasing and Quoting

Academic writing normally requires that you support your ideas and opinions with facts, statistics, quotations and similar kinds of information. There are two ways you can integrate information from other published sources into your own work, through direct quote or paraphrase. In terms of direct quotes you will be copying another person's exact words (either spoken or written) and enclose them in quotation marks. The following example illustrates this approach.

> It is no secret that performance enhancing drugs have been used by Olympic athletes for decades. According to an article in *Forbes* magazine, '[f]rom the brute steroids the east Germans reportedly used on their Olympians during the Cold War to today's man-made versions of natural human proteins, drugs have been as much a staple of the Games as gold, silver and bronze' (Herper 2008, p.2).

To introduce borrowed information in direct quotations, ensure you use the appropriate 'reporting verbs and/or phrases', such as the following:

- assert
- claim
- declare
- insist
- maintain
- mention
How to write a good paraphrase

There are three keys to writing a good paraphrase:

- Use your own words and your own sentence structure
- Make your paraphrase approximately the same length as the original
- Do not change the meaning of the original

You can write a good paraphrase if you follow these steps:

**Step 1**

Read the original passage several times until you understand it fully. Look up unfamiliar words and find synonyms for them. It may not be possible to find synonyms for every word, especially technical vocabulary. In such cases use the original word.

**Step 2**

It helps to take notes. Write down just a few words for each idea – not complete sentences.

**Step 3**

Written your paraphrase from your notes. Do not look at the original while you are writing.

**Step 4**

Check your paraphrase against the original to make sure you have not copied vocabulary or the sentence structure too closely. Above all, make sure you have not changed the meaning of the original or given any wrong information.

**Step 5**

Add an in-text citation at the end.

Exercise: From the handout read the paragraph and apply the procedure for writing paraphrases set out above.
The purpose of citations

There are several reasons why we reference, here are two of what I feel are the most important. Firstly, thesis writing requires we develop the ability to think critically about other people’s ideas. We agree with some, disagree with others. We negotiate the research territory to find a ‘gap’ in present knowledge that we can fill. In doing so we can take our place in the world of academic scholarship (which is a world built from the bricks of each person’s interlocking research). Of course this requires the ability to synthesize information and presents other scholar’s work in light of your own. These scholars must be recognized for their contributions to the field. If due recognition is not given then this may lead to charges of plagiarism.

Second, in academic writing we use certain types of ‘evidence’ to strengthen our arguments and convince the reader of the validity of our conclusions. This evidence takes the form of data, statistics, and published research. Citations are important in that they point to the findings of previously published work in such a way as they support our contentions.

A note on the concept of originality

Your originality lies in the way you develop your thinking in light of what you have read, in the way you respond critically to other people’s ideas, and in the way you...

The basic structure of referencing

I mentioned earlier that different disciplines adopt different referencing systems and this will be discussed shortly. However, the basic structure for referencing applies to all and can be represented visually as follows:
Example from Harvard referencing system:

(Milton, 1996 p.21)


An example from the MLA referencing system:

(Bryson 17)

An example from History

During recent years, this debate has evoked increasing interest in the role of peasants and artisans in the development of nineteenth-century socialist politics, particularly during the rise of socialism in France.


Referencing is a very precise skill, but not a particularly difficult one to develop. You don’t need to learn a lot of rules, nor do you even have to know the basic structure common to all referencing systems outlined above. Just follow the guide to the system required by your department (keep a copy with you when you are writing). Experienced academic writers follow referencing guides, rather than learning the small details of referencing systems.

Quoting

Quotations from reliable sources are good supporting details. There are two kinds of quotations; direct and indirect. In a direct quotation you copy another author’s exact words - either written or spoken - and enclose them in single quotation marks (the only exception being the case of block quotes which will be dealt with shortly). Direct quotations are strategically inserted into the body of your text. Indirect quotation, on the other hand, involves the reporting of another author’s ideas. This technique is called paraphrasing. Paraphrasing means putting what another author has said or written in your own words. Paraphrasing is a favored technique in many situations of writing, but one in which source materials need to be thoroughly understood if the paraphrase is to be effective. Again, we will examine paraphrasing
in more detail momentarily. But for now I just want to say that good academic writing always demonstrates a good balance between paraphrasing and quoting.

It is a good idea to quote a phrase directly only in the following situations:

- When it is difficult to explain an idea succinctly in your own words. That is, the author expresses the idea in a way that captures its essence and you feel you cannot represent it better in your own words.
- When the phrase is a technical phrase that you cannot write in other words.
- When an author has created a phrase that has become widely used by others.
- When you want to comment on the author’s use of language in a particular phrase.
- When a claim you are making is such that the doubting reader will want to hear exactly what the source said. This will often be the case when you criticize or disagree with a source.

At all other times it is better to paraphrase. Under no circumstances should you ‘over quote’ to the extent that your work is little more than a series of quotations glued together by a handful of connective phrases.

**Block quoting**

If you need to quote more than about three lines of prose — about 40-50 words — then indent the passage as a ‘block’ without quotation marks. Block quotes must be used sparingly and only when you need to analyze the language used in a text rather than just presenting the ideas.
The basic rules for quoting blocks are:

- Indent all lines ten spaces from the left margin and single space the text.
- Don’t put an indented block in quotation marks.
- Tell your reader in advance who is about to speak and what to be listening for.
- Construct your ‘lead in’ sentence with a colon (:).
- Follow up a block quotation with commentary that reflects on it and makes clear why you needed to quote it.
Introducing direct quotations as part of your own sentence

One of the most important things to consider in the integration of another author’s phrase is that there is a smooth flow within your sentence. That is, with the incorporation of the quoted your entire sentence is grammatically correct. You may find that you need to alter the punctuation and capital letters of the quoted phrases to suit their position in your sentence. This is perfectly acceptable, but there are some rules to consider. Remember, that your sentence controls the structure, not the words you quote. Below is an example:

Haigh (2006, p.26) describes ‘[t]he so-called dark web’ that Google and similar search engines do not include in their search results.

In closing.....

I think the following quote from John Harman's ‘Writing for Impact’ booklet sums up the main messages included in this workshop. Carry these techniques into the editing of your own work:

*Replace the long stuffy words you come across with short, plain ones. Rewrite the dead passive sentences into a live, active voice. Kick out the weak, abstract nouns and replace them with muscular verbs. Rip out the dead, rambling clichés and make the whole thing tighter and instantly understandable. Finally, warm it up and make it human and accessible.*