



FUTURE U
ACADEMIC SUPPORT

Academic Writing Guide

Please note the following is general guidance; different courses have different demands. You should check with individual tutors for specific requirements regarding academic writing.

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Section 1.0

Academic writing styles: writing for a purpose

Stella Cottrell (2003) states there are three main styles of academic writing: descriptive, argumentative and evaluative. Many writing tasks will involve some combination of the three.

1.1 Descriptive writing has different purposes. They are:

1. To describe what happened: e.g., main events, methods and findings
2. To describe the main features or functions: e.g., of a policy or practice
3. To summarise the main points: e.g., of a theory or article

There are several guidelines to follow when using descriptive writing:

- Identify relevant themes to include
- Be clear, precise and accurate
- Use a logical order and keep to the point
- Indicate the significance of what you describe

1.2 Argumentative writing is where you argue the case/point of view, to influence the reader's thoughts/actions.

There are several guidelines to follow when using argumentative writing:

- State your position clearly and concisely
- Use a clear line of reasoning to support your position
- Give reliable, relevant, valid and convincing evidence/examples to support your reasons
- Consider and respond to the possible arguments against your point
- Show there are different arguments

1.3 Evaluative writing involves:

- Comparing – finding the points of similarity
- Contrasting – finding the points of difference
- Evaluating the significance of similarities and differences. Do they matter? Do they have important implications for which model should be used? How did you decide what was significant?
- Making a judgement: give reasons for your opinion based on the evidence.
- Showing your criteria: Show what criteria you used to arrive at your opinion, e.g., data, research evidence
- Getting the balance right: compare like with like and give equal information and evidence to both

Descriptive writing

Argumentative writing

Evaluative writing

Section 2.0

The essay journey

Understanding the question

It is imperative that you understand the question you have been given. Failure to do so could result in a fail or a low mark. An effective technique to help you understand the question is to break it down.

2.1 Breaking down the question

Below is an example of a question given to the Public Services students:

Public Services essay question

Research the different views of citizenship in contemporary society and produce an essay that describes these different views. In your essay you must analyse the different views, evaluating and identifying how these views could affect the public services and society.

This is how you break it down

Public Services essay question

Research the **different views of citizenship in contemporary society** and produce an **essay** that **describes** these different views. In your essay you must **analyse** the different views, **evaluating** and **identifying how these views could affect the public services and society**.

Highlight in different colours the key aspects of the question such as the **instructional words (in red)**, **the format (in green)** and then **the question (in blue)**.

2.2 Understanding the meaning of instructional words

Before you start writing your essay you need to ensure that you understand the **instructional words (in red)**. If you 'describe' a topic when the question is asking you to 'analyse' it, you will lose marks. Some of the key instructional words are:

Instructional word	Meaning
Compare	Look for similarities and differences between; perhaps conclude which item is preferable.
Contrast	Examine the differences between and provide explanations.
Describe	Outline the main features or characteristics of something, or the main event (give a description of what something is like or what has happened).
Evaluate	Weigh up and judge the merits; judge the impact, importance or success of; support your evaluation with evidence.
Explain	Make clear why something happens, or why something is the way it is.
Justify	Provide evidence supporting an argument or idea; explain why you did something in a certain way or why a decision or conclusions were reached, considering any objections that others might make.

2.3 Familiarity with the format

You now need to ensure you have highlighted the **format (in green)**. The format is important because it informs you about which particular features will be allowed. For example, an essay is in written form only, no images or sub-headings are allowed. However, if your question states the format is a report then you can use images and sub-headings.

2.4 Identifying the question

Now you need to research the question (in green).

2.5 Different types of reading

Passive reading

- Let the book guide you
- You follow the story reading from the first page to the last page

Active reading

- Where you make demands of the text
- Pursuing the answer to a question
- Searching for particular information
- Make notes as you read (paraphrase)
- Highlight key information

2.6 Ways of reading and note taking

1. **Skimming:** Use the index, read the introductions and conclusions, read the sub-headings and the first line of the paragraph.
2. **Scanning:** You know exactly what you are looking for. For example, a name or theory.
3. **Search reading:** Look for key words or phrases by passing your eyes over the text (certain texts display key words in bold or underlined).
4. **Receptive reading:** Pay close attention to text, perhaps allowing time for thinking and re-reading.
5. **Word by word:** gaining new vocabulary but can be time-consuming
6. **Light reading:** for example, reading novels or newspapers.
7. **Highlighting:** read the text first and then re-read highlighting the important and relevant information
8. **Paraphrasing:** re-write in your own words the point you want to record. Paraphrasing, instead of copying, will help improve your understanding. Paraphrasing tends to include one main point and is usually one to two sentences long.
9. **Summarising:** re-write in your own words the points associated with the topic you are reading. A summary normally includes several points and can range from a paragraph to a book chapter.

2.7 Using your reading to support your writing

In developing your ideas and arguments in an essay you need to refer to a range of books, journals and other material to support your views/statements and give weight to your arguments. Below is some general guidance to enable you to do this without committing plagiarism and to enable your writing to become more academic. Please note that the College does use plagiarism checking software.

Do not...	Instead you should...
Pass off other people's ideas as your own	Acknowledge the source of the ideas and information by referencing.
Just piece together other people's ideas to construct your own argument	Use other people's ideas to scaffold your own argument
'Decorate' your essay with lots of direct quotes to prove you have read lots of books	Use direct quotes sparingly, introduce them carefully and make it clear how they relate to your ideas
Present other people's ideas as fact	Show you have critically questioned other people's work to inform your own learning
Just cite authors who agree with you	Bring in opposing ideas and show why you think they are mistaken.
Read passively, just collecting ideas and reading the lines	Engage with your reading – link it to other things you have learned/read, ask questions, and use it to develop your opinions and attitudes.

2.8 Introduction

- ✓ Your opening sentence should be a paraphrase of the question. Paraphrasing (instead of copying out) the question shows you have understood the task
- ✓ Inform the reader what you are going to be writing about. Do not assume that the reader will just be your teacher – you should be explicit and assume that the reader has little knowledge about your subject
- ✓ Introduce the main topic/concept/theory
- ✓ You may find it easier to write the introduction last. This is absolutely fine as it may help you to be more concise and precise about your writing
- ✓ Should be 10% of your word count

A good way to introduce your introduction is to ‘signpost’ to the reader. For example:

- This essay will discuss...
- This assignment will address...

A good example of an introduction:

‘This essay will analyse how key issues and concepts of lifelong learning are evident in the opportunities available to prisoners (both residing and remanded) aged 18 and over within a prison setting. This analysis will address key issues including the opportunity and cost of education, the effectiveness of implementation, literacy and technology, and future issues.’

2.9 Main body

Your main body should contain your answer. However your answer needs to be carefully planned and formatted using carefully constructed sentences and paragraphs. The first line of each paragraph should contain the ‘topic sentence’. This contains the main point of that paragraph. Every sentence thereafter should be related to that main point or ‘topic’. For example:

The Basic Skills Agency (BSA) argues that there is a significant correlation between repeated offending and poor literacy. Therefore, literacy should be central to any education delivered within the prison setting (BSA). OLASS tendered the contract of teaching literacy to various providers who introduced several literacy programs within prisons (O’Grady 2013). These literacy programs were delivered on a national and regional scale (OLASS).

The topic sentence introduces the main point which is the Basic Skills Agency (BSA) arguing about a problem or a ‘correlation’. The second sentence takes the point further by stating what needs to be done to address this problem. The third sentence describes what action has been taken and by who. The final sentence informs about the scope of the action taken.

You can then move onto your next paragraph which should contain a new point/topic. There are several ways of signposting your reader through your paragraphs to inform them that you are moving on. These signposts can also be used to introduce research, cause and effect, giving examples and comparing and contrasting.

For example:

Introducing arguments / drawing conclusions:

- It could be argued that...
- It would appear that...
- Therefore, it could be considered that...

Giving examples / providing evidence:

- This is highlighted by...
- For example...
- For instance...

Comparing and contrasting:

- In comparison to...
- When compared with...

Talking about other people's arguments and how they relate to one another:

- Brown argues that...
- Smith concludes that...
- Research conducted by Smith concluded that...
- Brown's idea is supported / rejected by Smith, who says that...

Discussing advantages and disadvantages:

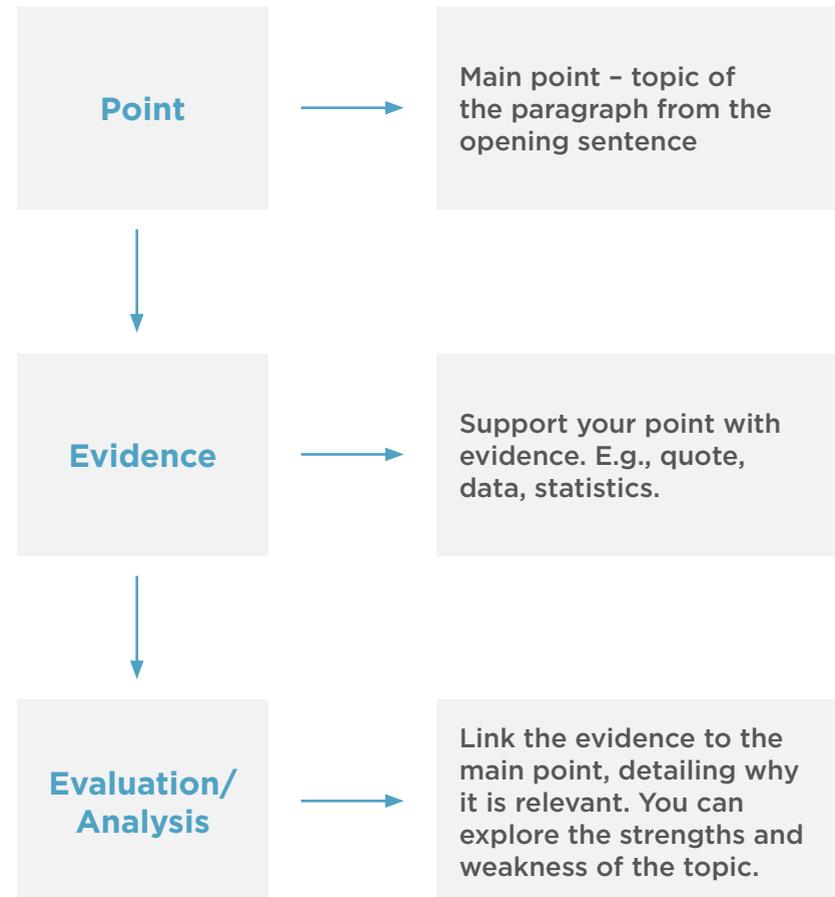
- This approach has clear advantages / disadvantages...
- An advantage / disadvantage of this method is...

Cause and effect:

- This has affected...
- This has had a significant effect on...
- Consequently...
- As a direct consequence of this...

PEE or PEA system

Within each paragraph you should try to implement the below system:



If you are unsure how to reference please contact your Tutor, or collect a referencing guide from the library.

2.10 Conclusion

Your conclusion is a 'summary' of your main body and therefore you should not include any 'new' information within this section. Within your conclusion you should:

- Refer back to the question
- Summarise your answer or findings
- Where applicable, suggest recommendations or implications
- Where applicable comment and give your own opinion
- Use signposting such as 'To conclude...'

2.11 Essay checklist:

Essay Question/Title:

- Does the essay have the full and correct essay title?
- Do you understand the question?
- Do you understand the terminology and jargon within the question?

Introduction:

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

Main body:

- Is there plenty of relevant and valid evidence (references) to support your claims or answer the question?
- Have you put each main point in a separate paragraph?
- Are the paragraphs logically linked?
- Are the ideas clearly referenced?

Conclusion:

- Have you summarised your main body sufficiently?
- Have you stated your general conclusions?
- There is no new information being written
- Have you linked your conclusion to the essay title?

Section 3.0

Editing and proofreading

Editing your essay should be conducted whilst you are proof-reading. You might change parts of your essay a number of times before you are ready to submit it. This is normal and should be considered an important part of essay writing. It is the final active stages which allow you to strengthen your work.

3.1 Editing self-check list:

Content and argument:

- Does the essay answer the question?
- Is all the information relevant to the issues in the question?

Research material:

- Do I use enough examples and evidence to illustrate my point?
- Are my references appropriate and accurate?

Structure:

- Are my ideas linked together logically?
- Are my paragraphs well structured?
- Do my paragraphs link together well?

Style:

- Is the writing style formal?
- Is the essay free of slang, colloquialisms and contractions?
- Is there any copied text? (Plagiarism!)
- Do I use the appropriate technical vocabulary?

5. Clarity:

- Is my writing cohesive or is there any confusion?
- Is it detailed enough and not vague or ambiguous?

6. General:

- Does the introduction introduce the reader to the issues of the question and does it state how these issues will be addressed within my writing?
- Is my punctuation, spelling and grammar correct?
- Does my reference list contain every in-text citation used?
- Have I taken on board any previous assignment feedback?

3.2 Proofreading guidance

Items you should proofread are:

Grammar and punctuation	Over-repetition	Over-wordiness
Ambiguity and correct use of acronyms.	Incorrect use of words	Missing words or letters
Layout: essay, report, research project, PowerPoint, poster, reflective writing.	British English spellings vs American spellings (Colour vs Color and Recognise vs Recognize)	Referencing systems (are you using the correct one? APA or Harvard?)
Correct use of abbreviations	Delete contractions	Cohesion
Spacing between words and between paragraphs	Change of tense	Singular / plural mistakes
Correct use of 1st, 2nd and 3rd person	Essay structure	Auto-corrections

3.3 Grammar, Punctuation and Syntax

Each word within a sentence has a specific function. It is important that you understand and are familiar with the following words:

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.

Nouns: 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.

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'.

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'.

Punctuation

Misuse of punctuation is the cause of many 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. Incorrect punctuation can change the semantic meaning of a word or sentence.

For example:

Let's eat, Grandma

Does not have the same meaning as:

Let's eat Grandma

Commas:

Commas act as separators between parts of a sentence. If you were speaking the sentence aloud, where there is a comma, you would take a breath.

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. 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.

Apostrophes:

Correct use of the apostrophe shows clarity of thought and a good understanding of the relationship between the nouns in a sentence. 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'. 'As a general rule, contractions should be avoided in academic writing because it can be deemed as lazy writing.

Speech marks:

Speech marks "mark speech". The majority of quotations in academic work will therefore require speech marks.

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.

Using unnecessary (redundant) 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.

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.

Section 4.0

General academic writing guidance

General academic good practice

- A. Use formal, Standard English – avoid colloquial terms and dialect.
- B. Avoid abbreviations and contractions. For example:
- ‘can’t’ should be written as: cannot, don’t = do not
 - e.g., should be written as: for example
- C. Numbers below ten are written out in full, except in statistical and scientific work.
- The book had two pages.
 - The book had 11 pages
- D. Be impersonal (unless instructed otherwise) – avoid using first and second person, instead you should be using third person.
- ‘I have found that...’ (using 1st person)
 - ‘It has been found that...’ (using 3rd person)
- E. Be cautious. Avoid sweeping statements – use words and phrases such as:
- ‘The evidence suggests that...’ and ‘In some cases...’
 - You can never be absolute about the truth
- F. Use rational argument rather than emotive language.
- G. Be objective – avoid personal, subjective words such as ‘wonderful’
- H. Use continuous prose – lists and headings are for reports and projects.
- I. Do not address the reader directly by asking them a direct question
- J. Use short, straightforward sentences
- K. Avoid clichés such as:
- ‘At the end of the day’
- L. Ensure that you have spelt commonly misspelled words correctly. Such as:
- Affect Vs effect
 - Their, there and they’re
 - Than Vs Then
 - Where, we’re and wear
 - To, too and two
 - Except Vs accept
 - Advice Vs advise
 - Choose Vs chose
 - Stationary Vs stationery
 - Threw Vs through
 - It’s vs Its



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