4th Edition

Critical Reading and Writing for Postgraduates

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This chapter introduces advanced writing techniques, with a particular focus on long documents. It builds on the guidance in Chapter 7 to help you with the more challenging aspects of presenting your ideas as effectively as possible. As previously noted, the core aim is helping your readers identify and evaluate your claims and recognize the basis for finding them convincing. Effective academic writers do this in subtle ways that give readers confidence in the authority with which they present those claims. Academic writing skills take time to develop, and both first and second language users usually need support from a supervisor or mentor to improve their writing at this level. Drafting and redrafting text is a career-long activity for academics.

**Precision writing: choosing your words carefully**

Readers will be distracted from your ideas if your writing contains awkward phrasings, unexpected vocabulary or unnecessary repetition. Precision draws your reader’s attention towards the things you want them to notice.
Avoiding repetition by using synonyms

Synonyms are words or phrases that have almost the same meaning. One stylistic ground rule for academic writers is using synonyms to avoid repeating a word (or word part) too soon. It’s important to develop a large enough vocabulary for alternatives to be available. A thesaurus is one place to start, and word processing programs often include one. However, care is needed for three reasons.

First, thesaurus programs aren’t very detailed or sophisticated. A full, published thesaurus such as Roget will provide a much more comprehensive set of words. Roget online – www.roget.org/ – is a convenient, but less extensive, option. Second, a thesaurus only assembles words according to similarities of meaning. Very few words have exact synonyms, and there are almost always restrictions on their interchangeability. A thesaurus can draw your attention to a word you hadn’t thought of or aren’t familiar with, but you may have to check a dictionary to see if it’s suitable. Third, if you immediately consult a thesaurus whenever you’re stuck for a word, you won’t develop your word retrieval skills. It’s best to search your own mind for alternatives first, and only go to a thesaurus if you still can’t think of one. Then, weigh up the options carefully, by reflecting on your experience of that word in use.

Avoiding confusion due to vagueness

When redrafting a lengthy document, passages often get moved, and previously logical developments of an argument are disrupted. Here are some precision writing tactics that will minimize such problems.

- Avoid terms like former, latter and ibid. because shifting material could change what they refer to. Be explicit or, if you want to use such terms, add them in the final draft.
- Avoid above and below when referring to figures and tables, because, to avoid blank space on the page, you may need to move the position of figures and tables, relative to where you refer to them. Instead, refer to them by number (see next point).
- Even in early drafts, avoid referring to the table or this figure. It may be difficult later to work out which one you meant. Label each table and figure with a unique number beginning with the chapter number, then a full stop, then its place in the sequence at the moment (e.g. Table 3.1, Table 3.2) – as in this book. Word-processing programs will let you automatically link, label and update them, but may increase the file size considerably. One manual alternative is to highlight every label in your draft, and every reference to it. Later, you can easily find and check the numbers are in sequence and correctly referred to in the text. Change the highlight colour (indicating you’ve completed that task), but don’t remove it, because you may need to check them again later.
Avoid using ‘this’ vaguely as in: the implications of this are important or this seems likely. Both you and the reader need to know exactly what ‘this’ refers to. If you can put a noun after this, do so, e.g. the implications of this argument are important; this outcome seems likely. If you can’t, rephrase, to be clearer and more precise.

Making citations and quotes work for you

It’s no surprise that we recommend care with referencing, given that published research is so often a major source of warranting for claims. We have already highlighted the importance of accuracy in Chapter 7. But you should also make sure that your readers can see how each reference is contributing to the warranting of your overall argument. Aim for your reader always to be able to answer the following questions: What’s being referred to? Why is it being referred to? How can I find it?

We recommend that, when making notes based on your reading, you use quotes when possible (suitably marked as such, of course), as warranting for the interpretations you make. Not everything will end up as a quote in your text, but quotes keep you directly connected to the original claims in the source while you assemble your ideas. Whether a quote or not, it’s vital to note down the full reference, including page numbers, each time, so you can always trace it to its source, even when it’s separated from other notes.

Using tables, figures and appendices effectively

When you are writing to a tight word limit, tables and figures can be useful, capturing a lot of information in fewer words than you would otherwise need. To gain this benefit, do not duplicate the table or figure content in your commentary. Rather, refer the reader to it, and then say new things arising from it. Tables and figures should directly contribute to warranting your argument. Tables typically describe and illustrate. They summarize important information succinctly, showing how it is organized and what its significance is. Figures typically explain. They demonstrate relationships between ideas, and so have scope to generate more information than has been put in. A reader may ask of a figure, What does this relationship imply? Critically evaluating a figure entails judging whether the juxtaposition of components is consistent with the claims in the narrative, and whether the onward implications are plausible.

For example, Figure 8.1 in this book introduced the mental map for navigating the literature. The internal boxes show that some components are more closely linked than others. The map can be read as (A + B) → C → (D + E).
Developing Advanced Writing Skills

It shows that to make claims to knowledge (D) with greater or lesser certainty and generalization (E), you first need to have determined what you are trying to find out (reasons for studying and for trying to make an impact (C)). That process requires first selecting the appropriate use of tools for thinking (A) and choosing ways of thinking about the social world (B). Although we explain these relationships in the text, the diagram succinctly captures them. The shading in Figures 9.1, 9.3, 10.1, 11.1 and 11.2 draws attention to the component currently in focus, within its context.

Appendices must also be mentioned in the main text. They can be likened to footnotes, providing information that the reader should have access to, but which is not central to the narrative. The test for whether something should be in an appendix is: If the reader didn’t bother looking at this material, would it affect how convinced they were by the claims? If it would, the material should be in the main text. So, data without which the claims can’t be warranted, and information that is directly discussed rather than only mentioned as existing, should not be in appendices. For this reason, it’s rare for figures to be found in appendices, whereas tables of background information, sample questionnaires, etc., may well be.

**Elegance: the art of good academic writing**

Elegance in academic writing combines grace and style with neatness and simplicity in organizing and expressing ideas. Authors make careful choices when putting across the substance of their argument, offering text that is easy and enjoyable to read, while directing readers towards a more exact understanding of what they want to say. Elegant writing increases readers’ confidence in the writer as competent and attentive to detail and engenders positive opinions about the quality of the work more generally. Elegant academic writing is well-paced and flows effortlessly through the reader’s mind, without awkward expressions or contextually jarring words. It is clear and direct (without being abrupt) and manages to capture the inherent complexity of ideas in accessible form.

We recommend that you make a habit of experimenting with your own writing to develop elegance. For example, take a sentence that feels awkward and rewrite it several different ways, noticing what you’re doing each time. You might change the order of components, split a sentence, or changing a word or two, as in the example below. As recommended in Chapter 7, model your own writing on what you find effective in others’ work. However, keep in mind that part of the art of good authorship is writing in different styles for different purposes, so draw your inspiration from work of the same type.
Keeping to word limits

Word limits in postgraduate coursework ensure fairness, as students are assessed on the same basis. They also simulate academic writing practices, because journal and book publishers almost always impose strict word limits. The typical challenge that postgraduates and professional academics face is not in finding enough to say but cutting text down to fit the word limit. As it’s generally easier to remove words than add them, it’s fine for your draft to be longer than you need, provided it’s within editable distance of your target. As noted in Chapter 7, preassigning a rough word limit to each section of your structure will help you keep within manageable bounds, after which simple rewording can reduce the word count by a surprising amount.

If you need to reduce your wordage by more, the most drastic solution is removing a whole section, topic or point, if it won’t undermine the convincingness of your argument. If all the ideas you’ve put in are needed, consider summarizing some. Check if any topics are (unnecessarily) covered in more detail than others and begin there. When editing, always focus on what the reader needs for following your overall direction. It’s quite common in drafts to include superfluous information because it’s interesting or shows you did the work. If readers wouldn’t miss it, it can go. Perhaps you could replace it with a footnote indicating that there’s a discussion or a point of information that you’ve chosen not to include. Indeed, if you will have a viva voce exam, such notes can encourage the examiners to ask about that topic, meaning you get to cover it after all.

Examples of a less well and better crafted draft

Read these earlier (A) and later (B) drafts of a paragraph, which illustrate the guidance in this chapter and some of that in Chapter 7. The sentences have been numbered for the convenience of this commentary.

Examples of a less well and better crafted draft

**Version A:** [A1] One important thing to keep in mind is how social isolation could increase the risk of developing dementia symptoms for which there are several possible reasons. [A2] Research has shown that regularly interacting with others is a way to sustain brain function and boost immune system function, reduce stress and raise cortisol, adrenaline, and noradrenaline levels (Seeman, 1996). [A3] This explains why social interaction reduces the risk of depression (Fratiglioni, Wang, Ericsson, Maytan, & Winblad, 2000), which is risk factor for dementia (Livingston et al., 2017). [A4] In those already residing
Comparing [A1] with [B1] we see that a rather empty introductory clause has been removed. The awkward ‘for which there are’ has been avoided by moving ‘several possible reasons’ to the front. In [B2], the initial clause of [A2] has been deleted. But [B2] adds reference to a figure. Although a figure may increase the page count even if not the word count, it will help the reader visualize the causal relationships between the elements described. Rephrasing in [B2] avoids the repetition of ‘function’. The list of hormones has been removed, judged to be more information than the reader needs. With the reference to Seeman also gone, words will be saved in the bibliography too. [A3] has been merged into [B2], losing the initial vague ‘This’ and softening the over-certain and over-generalized claim of explaining why depression is reduced. In the clause ending with the Livingstone reference, the missing ‘a’ has been reinstated, and ‘which is’ has gone, improving the elegance. In [A4], the author has used a thesaurus to find an alternative to ‘living’, but ‘residing’ is not appropriate and needed to be changed back. However, in version B, the entire sentence has been deleted, not because it doesn’t say something useful, but because, if words have to be removed, it is the sentence contributing least to the overall argument. Another missing word in [A5], ‘at’, is reinstated in [B3]. By now, version B is two sentences shorter and has 30% fewer words. But the author now adds a sentence [B5], introducing a quote from one of the two sources referenced in [A6]. This elegantly draws the reader’s attention to a ‘take home’ message, while providing more insight into the content of that source.

Changes of this sort can greatly enhance the quality of the finished work. Why not find a paragraph of your own writing and experiment with editing in this way?
The beginning of the end, or the end of the beginning?

For many postgraduates, passing the PhD heralds the beginning of an academic career. If you are in this group, you will find critical reading and self-critical writing skills highly transferable, offering a sound starting point for continuing to develop your critical frame of mind as a professional.

Many academic activities benefit from critical reading. They include supervising students, mentoring post-doctoral researchers and colleagues, and peer-reviewing journal articles, research funding applications and conference abstracts. Self-critical writing, meanwhile, helps ensure that everything you write, from books and journal articles to lecture materials and comments on students’ work, is crafted for its purpose and audience, so you achieve the impact you seek.

Whether as an academic or in some other job or profession that draws on your critical reading and writing skills, the challenge is to remain alert to what you are trying to achieve, and how the skills and knowledge you have accumulated can be best used to achieve it. Over to you.