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Learning and Writing at University



chapter themes

- Academic writing has to communicate.
- Essays are just one type of academic writing.
- Essay writing is a process.
- Learning at university involves more than just knowing facts.
- Assessment, marking criteria and marks reflect expectations.

Chapter 1 gives you an overview of why writing is important at university. Understanding this will put you in a better position to write more effectively as it will provide you with the background you need to make sense of why essays have to be written in a rather prescribed way. Part of this simply involves developing your understanding of what your tutors expect of you, but another very important aspect has to do with the fact that writing seriously about something is also in itself a way of learning about it.

Writing for communication, learning and assessment

Writing is a form of communication, but at university it is also used both to stimulate learning and as a basis on which to assess you. It plays a big part

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in the mission of the university, which is to develop its students so that they can fulfil their potential and to award qualifications which reflect how far that potential has been fulfilled.

Facts and ideas must go into your writing, but the tutor who reads your essay will already know a lot of these – so what you actually communicate is your interpretation or understanding of the subject. This is what your tutor does not know, and it is what will persuade him or her to give your work a certain mark. At the same time, the discipline of presenting information and ideas in the form of a clear, logical argument will in itself help you to develop a deeper understanding of the issues. That is because it forces you to decide what to include and what to emphasise, how to illustrate what you mean, to make links explicit, and so on. Seeing writing in this way will help you understand why it can be a challenge, but it is also the first step in enabling you to rise to the challenge. It is thus not entirely true to think of reading and listening to lectures as the ‘learning bit’ and writing assignments simply as the way you can show tutors what you have learnt.

One of the most perplexing aspects of writing for students is to be given feedback which tells them that it is not clear what the essay is about. They protest, ‘*But it’s perfectly clear to me!*’ When you write an essay, it is easy to forget that you are writing both *about* a topic and *for* a reader who has certain expectations, so saying, ‘*Ah, but what I meant ...*’ – though understandable – is not acceptable. Your reader, who will usually be your tutor, will never know what you really meant unless this it is the same as what you really wrote.

Your aim in any kind of writing must be to communicate your thoughts and ideas to the intended reader(s). You should remember this even if the reader is yourself – for example, when you are writing a diary or making notes. Have you ever read some of your previous notes or parts of an old diary and had absolutely no idea what you were talking about? If your writing here was clear, you would have understood it without having to rely on your memory.

In order for optimum communication to take place, your writing at university must therefore conform to some shared standards and expectations. University codes and conventions for behaviour determine what is expected in academic writing. Tutors, researchers and students are all expected to share common ground in terms of behaviour, values and attitudes. This commonality is sometimes referred to as ‘academic culture’. To be successful, you must adapt to this and be part of it. For example, universities in the UK will expect a commitment to the following:

- respect for everybody within the culture;
- respect for learning;
- respect for intellectual property;

- fairness;
- equal rights and non-discrimination;
- independent learning.

These values determine much of what is expected in academic writing. Different disciplines may emphasise or minimise different aspects of learning in the culture. For example, different subject areas may have different research traditions: some will be geared towards empirical research and will spend a lot of time doing experiments in laboratories, or working on statistical data collection and analysis. Others will focus on reading and on text and discourse analysis, others on creative output, and so on. However, all academic disciplines will subscribe to the basic principles listed above.

Effective written communication

This section examines the fundamental principles of all effective written communication, starting with a brief consideration of a form of writing we are all familiar with: personal writing.

Personal writing



activity 1.1

Pause for reflection

Write two short messages:

- 1 An email (or text message) to a close friend and course mate who was with you last night, and whom you have arranged to meet after class;
- 2 An email to your tutor (with whom you had an appointment).

In both cases you should tell them that you will not be able to meet them today because you have a bad hangover from last night.

Did you produce two identical pieces of writing? It would be very odd if you did! You were writing on the same subject in both cases, but the different readers and purposes made you compose very different messages. Although

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the reasons for writing may be similar (cancelling an appointment), the purpose of one appointment was social while the other was 'business'.

This example tells us something of fundamental importance for all written communication. In order to write effectively, we always need to consider the following:

- the audience (who is the intended reader?);
- the purpose (why are you writing?).

In addition, there are two other considerations which will depend on the answers you get to the 'who' and 'why' questions above, and these are content (the 'what?') and organisation (the 'how?'). These will determine:

- your choice of information and words;
- the grammar and sentence construction;
- the mechanics (spelling, punctuation);
- the style (formal or informal way of writing).

Who? Why? What? How? are the four questions which must be answered if you want your message to be clear – whatever type of writing you wish to produce. I will refer to these as the 'four Qs' in this chapter.

The four Qs in academic writing

We will now examine the four Qs in academic writing, to show how the 'Who?', 'Why?' and 'What?' lead to the 'How?'

- **Who (your reader):** *Who* will read your work? The main reader will be the tutor(s) of the course, who will most likely have had a hand in setting the assignment. The reader will therefore be a person who is knowledgeable about the content matter of the assignment and who has designed the task with certain expectations in mind. This is especially true of the essay. The reflective diary/journal is a tool for developing self-awareness and reflective skills and is usually assessed by both your tutor and yourself.

Reports may also be read by other interested parties, including your course mates; reviews could be published and read by many in the field; laboratory reports are not only for your tutor, but are also records and evidence of the process and results of work or experiments you have done (especially in psychology and other sciences).

- **Why (your purpose):** *Why* do you write at university? The most obvious reason is that you have to! Written assignments are still the most common way to assess what students *know* and what they *can do*. You write because you want

to get the qualification that proves you have learnt something and can communicate this. Importantly, however, the act of writing is a learning process in itself. When you approach writing critically, you engage in a thinking and learning process which is part of the university tradition. All these are important reasons for writing at university.

To understand specifically why you have to produce a particular piece of writing you need to understand the learning outcomes of the module (see page 16). Understanding what you achieve when you successfully complete an assignment will give you a sense of satisfaction and purpose. Understanding the language of learning outcomes also means you know why assignments and essays are designed and worded in the ways they are.

- **What (the content):** The answer to the question of *what* you write is of course the content and context of your writing. Different types of writing, and even different types of essay, require you to select information in a discriminating and appropriate way. Until you have understood an essay question, you will not know what information is most relevant.
- **How (structure and style):** *How* you write refers to the way information is organised or structured and the way or style in which it is put together, and this may vary from one type of writing to another. For example, reports have a clear structure with headings and are written in a specific reporting style. They are very different from essays, which are almost always presented as continuous prose written according to academic conventions (see page 11). All academic writing is formally structured in a recognisable style, and this must be consistent and appropriate for the particular type of writing. Nevertheless, each type of writing must comply with the academic standards set by most courses, which require a more or less formal style as well as accurate grammar, spelling and punctuation.

This academic style can be confusing to students as it can differ quite radically between different types of writing (for example, a formal essay and a reflective diary entry). Indeed, you may well need to write in more than one style within one piece of work (as when nursing students, for instance, have to reflect on practice and relate theory to practice in the same essay). To make it even more difficult, different subjects or even tutors may or may not accept stylistic variations. When in doubt, ask your tutor and look at examples of good practice.

As you can see, the question of *How* is very much determined by the *Who*, *Why* and *What*. Although you may think you only want to know about the *How* of writing essays, you cannot really gain a full understanding of that until you have some answers to the first three questions.

While this book covers one particular type of writing – the essay – the basic principles set out here can be applied to other types of academic writing. The four *Qs* may give different answers for different assignments, but they will always be useful answers.

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Types of writing at university

You may be required to produce any or all of the following types of writing in an undergraduate or postgraduate course:

- summaries;
- essays;
- project reports;
- portfolios of work;
- laboratory reports;
- a dissertation;
- research papers/articles;
- exam answers;
- journal articles;
- book/chapter reviews;
- case study analyses;
- reflective journals and essays;
- reflective diaries and logs.

If you chose to arrange this list according to how formal you think each type of writing is, you would probably agree that reflective diaries and logs are the least formal and research papers and articles the most formal. Each type on this list differs from the others. Therefore you should know what each one requires you to do before you attempt it. Essays belong to the more formal end and are the focus of this book, but it is useful here to point out some of the main differences between three common types of formal academic writing.

Three common types of academic writing

One of the first writing assignments that students face is a report or an essay. One of the last and most important will often be a dissertation. These are discussed together in this section because they are each formal and have similar formal characteristics, but they are also different.

It is important for you to know the differences between an essay and a report early on while at university. How frustrating it is to be told 'You have written a report instead of an essay as instructed'. These are considered here for this very reason, but also in order to answer the question that must be foremost in many students' minds when reading a book on essay writing: 'What *is* an academic essay?'

- **Similarities between essays and reports**

Reports and essays (and dissertations) all require:

- a formal style – this is a prerequisite of most academic writing;
- a formal structure – namely, an introduction, a main part and a conclusion;
- analytical thinking – that is, argument which shows you have analysed the information from your reading or research in a critical way;

- careful proofreading and neat presentation – this means your work must be free from typographic errors and grammar and spelling mistakes, and should be wordprocessed.
- **Differences between a report and an essay**
Table 1.1 summarises the *main* differences between a report and an essay. However, it must be stressed that there are many types of reports and different essay types, and therefore you need to be prepared for crossovers.

Table 1.1 Main differences between a report and an essay

	<i>Report</i>	<i>Essay</i>
Purpose	To convey specific information	To show how well you have understood the question and how well you are able to answer it
Purpose	To present information, data, results of research	To present an argument or ideas in response to the essay question
Reader/Purpose	Is meant to be read quickly	Is meant to be read carefully
Structure/Style	Is structured into sections with different headings	Is structured as an argument in one piece of prose with clear Introduction, Body and Conclusion
Format/Style	Uses numbered headings and sub headings	Does not usually use numbered sections
Referencing/Style	May not need in-text citations and bibliography/reference list (depending on type of report)	Always needs in-text citations and bibliography/reference list
Structure/Style	Uses short, concise paragraphs and bullet points where applicable	Links ideas into cohesive paragraphs
Visuals/Style	Uses visuals wherever necessary (tables, graphs, illustrations)	Rarely uses visuals
Style/Writing	May be written using a mixture of styles	Is usually written in one (formal) style
Structure	May need an abstract (sometimes called an executive summary)	Will only need an abstract if very long, or if tutor asks for one
Structure	Often contains several conclusions, depending on the terms of reference (aims and purposes)	Will contain a conclusion which answers the question
Structure	May end with recommendations and/or appendices	Seldom has recommendations or appendices

The terms used to describe an essay will be made clear in the course of this book. As you can see from the row in the table on format/style, an essay will not even *look* like a report at all. They look different because they have different functions. In many ways, reports are easier to write – facts are communicated

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in a straightforward, direct way and they follow a more or less standard structure. Essays demand a more skilful use of structure and language in order to sustain very varied arguments.

Although these differences can be summarised, as with all generic and generalised information, it is best for you to find out exactly what your own department, course and tutor expect. Some courses and tutors may expect or accept headings, subheadings and diagrams in their students' essays, particularly in such subjects as Business, Design, Technology and Health.

- **The dissertation compared to the report and essay**

The dissertation is a challenging and exciting piece of work that awaits most of you in your final year at university. It demands that you use the skills of research, writing, critical thinking, time management, etc. that you have been developing in the first two years, and certainly all the information you can get for the topic you have chosen. It is helpful to know, even if you are only in your first year, how your writing skills are being developed towards writing this extended piece of writing. I often hear students say 'I've never written a dissertation before': yes, but neither has anybody else as they start their third year. However, everyone should have written essays, reports and other types of academic writing. Ask yourself the four Qs each time you are faced with producing an unfamiliar type of academic writing.

Unlike essays and reports, the question, topic, terms of reference and purpose of your dissertation will usually be determined by you and not your tutor, although their approval will probably have had to be sought. You will be expected by Year 3 to have reached the sort of academic maturity required to put together an extended piece of work, usually of between 5,000 and 8,000 words, for an undergraduate dissertation. The length of the dissertation means that it must be divided into chapters, with appropriate headings, subheadings and numbering. From this point of view, it looks like a report.

The table below is based on Table 1.1, and the middle and right-hand columns illustrate the characteristics of a dissertation that are also found in a report and essay.

Table 1.2 Characteristics of a dissertation

	<i>Dissertations may have these features</i>	
	<i>in common with Reports</i>	<i>in common with Essays</i>
Purpose	To convey specific information	To show how well you have put together a research project to answer the research question(s) you posed
Purpose	To present information, data, results of research	To present an argument or ideas in response to the research question

Table 1.2 (Continued)

	<i>Dissertations may have these features</i>	
	<i>in common with Reports</i>	<i>in common with Essays</i>
Reader/ Purpose	Is meant to be read quickly (the abstract)	Is meant to be read carefully (the argument)
Structure/Style	Is structured into sections or chapters with different headings	Is structured as an argument
Format/Style	Uses numbered headings and subheadings	
Structure/Style	Uses short, concise paragraphs and bullet points where appropriate (e.g., under certain headings like Recommendations)	Links ideas into cohesive paragraphs
Referencing/Style		Always needs in-text citations and bibliography/reference list
Visuals/Style	Uses visuals wherever necessary (tables, graphs, illustrations)	
Style/Writing	Written using a mixture of styles (e.g., Presentation of Data vs Literature Review sections)	Written in one (formal) style
Structure	Needs an abstract or summary	
Structure	Often contains several conclusions, depending on the research questions/focus	Will contain conclusions in keeping with the argument
Structure	May end with a recommendation/discussion section and appendices	

Depending on the topic and discipline, a dissertation may look and read more like a report or a long critical essay. Although report and dissertation writing is not the focus of this book, the essay writing skills and strategies that are covered in depth are all transferable to other types of academic writing. Throughout this book it will be emphasised that when you learn how to write using the deep approach to writing and learning (see page 16), you will be better able to see the connections between known and new situations, events or knowledge, and to learn more effectively. Whatever academic writing is required, it is helpful to start with a consideration of the process.

The writing process

Many books on writing mention four stages in the process of academic writing: Pre-writing, Drafting, Revising and Editing. These steps must not

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be seen as separate and unrelated – to be approached in a linear fashion. Rather, they must operate in a cyclical fashion and overlap. This book is organised according to these stages.

The four stages

Pre-writing, as the name suggests, involves the preparation for writing. For any particular assignment this is the stage where ideas are generated, and will include:

- reading the assignment carefully;
- analysing it;
- drawing up a rough plan;
- sourcing the necessary data/information;
- reading widely, and reading in depth;
- taking and making notes;
- discussing ideas and information with others;
- refining the plan, and so on.

It is at the pre-writing stage that you bring into play skills which may not be seen as ‘writing’ skills in themselves, but which will nevertheless have a great impact on the quality of your writing. You cannot write a good academic essay unless you also have the enabling skills of reading and research, note-making, paraphrasing and summary writing. These skills are dealt with in this book for this very reason.

In practice, ideas are often generated as you write, and exploring such newly developed ideas will often require you to revisit some aspects of pre-writing. When you write, the fact that you have to express and communicate ideas on paper forces you to think more deeply about them.

You are ready to start **drafting** parts of your essay when you think you know the shape which it will take and are confident that you have acquired enough information to put it together. Drafting involves:

- Arranging your ideas into some kind of structure to give your essay a shape.
- Writing paragraphs to connect your ideas. Although thinking and planning are essential, the act of writing will create changes. As you start to put words on paper and connect them up, they take on a life of their own, and you might have to change direction or implement new ideas.
- Thinking about form and function, namely the language and style you will use. However, at this creative stage, it may be that you do not want to worry too much about the mechanics of writing such as spelling or even well-formed sentences.

When drafting, you may want to spill everything out in creative surges, completing your first draft in one sitting using your notes; or you may choose to write a couple of paragraphs at a time, filling in the gaps in your original plan. There is no one right way – only what you prefer and what the situation dictates. However, it is not advisable to delay the first complete draft for too long as you might lose your train of thought or change your mind too drastically. It is far better to complete a first draft as soon as possible, leave it for a while, and then come back to it with a fresh mind for the next stage. Indeed you may need to go through a few rough drafts before you find the best approach.

Revising involves re-drafting or re-writing, and even re-planning. This is rather more focused than writing the first draft. You now have a clearer idea of what you want to say, and you should start thinking more about your reader and purpose. You may perhaps need to refine your argument or examine the supporting evidence. To do this, you might have to make your writing clearer by re-organising, re-phrasing, re-examining your views, and so on.

Reading your essay aloud or having someone else read it are some of the methods that students may employ at this stage. Some writers revise as they go along, while others wait until they have finished the first complete draft. Again, there is no single right way of doing this.

Editing is the final, very important step before you hand in your assignment, and you may have already edited partially as you were writing. This is when you need to take on board any feedback you have received and:

- check that you have followed all the conventions, rules and instructions of your course/subject/department;
- check your spelling, punctuation, grammar and references – both in the text and in the bibliography;
- consider the presentation (or layout) of your essay.

Evidence of editing is often missing in student assignments that have been put together in haste, perhaps the night before. You stand to receive a lower mark than your hard work deserves if you do not go through this step conscientiously.

This brings us to the question of marks: the most important aspect for you. How can you get the best mark possible? You will get the best mark when you are able to show that you have learnt what was expected of you from the course. Writing an academic essay carries you through the learning process; the final product reflects how well you have learnt. You will need to use a whole range of intellectual or cognitive skills when you write an essay as well as a whole range of approaches, techniques and strategies to learn (and therefore to write) better.

Getting the best mark

The surface and deep approaches to learning

Learning is not just about the acquisition of facts, and at university it is certainly not about simply memorising and regurgitating them in exams and assignments. If you believe this, you may not spend enough time reflecting on and assimilating the knowledge gained and too much time collecting facts and trying to remember them. This is the *surface approach* to learning and it may indeed help you do a reasonable job in objective tests, where the answers required are either wrong or right. However, in essay writing the emphasis lies not on how many facts you have collected on the topic, but on how well you are able to put the relevant information together to answer the question posed.

When facts are remembered discretely, connections between new and existing knowledge are often missed. Connections across different modules in a programme may not be made and you may see them as separate instead of connected entities. Effective learners can relate the new and the known and fall back on life experiences and are able to look at facts objectively and critically. They take the *deep approach* to learning which demands more effort and time. Understanding how best to learn – and particularly the part that reflection plays – can help you learn more effectively.

Most learning theories would concur that learning effectively involves reflecting on an activity or experience both before and after it happens. In the last 20 years, there has been considerable movement towards making the act of reflection a focus in itself in higher education, bringing it to the fore by introducing reflective tasks and writing into the academic regime. Previously, reflective writing was mainly something that professionals such as teachers and nurses were encouraged to consciously engage in. Many disciplines now encourage their students to reflect in a more conscious, deliberate and structured way by using portfolios, learning journals or diaries for their set tasks. However, you should be aware that reflection on its own is not enough to promote learning – you must act on your reflections.

If you want to know about learning theories and your learning style preferences, the 'Reflection and Review' section at the end of this chapter offers some further investigation.

Understanding learning outcomes

University assignments try to direct you towards developing the deep approach to learning. All modules have stated learning outcomes, and these will have been very carefully developed by tutors, in some cases in consultation

with staff from other universities. Assessments, including essays, will refer to these learning outcomes, and information about them will be provided with module descriptors.

Some students may not read these module descriptors carefully, which is a pity because everything they need to know about a module is reflected there: the number of hours involved, who is teaching it, the syllabus, and the modes and deadlines of assessments. The terms 'learning objectives' and 'learning outcomes' inform you about what the course aims to do and what you will have learnt on successful completion. Examples 1.1 to 1.3 below show how learning outcomes are presented to students at different levels.



example 1.1

Learning outcomes: level 1 module

On successful completion of this module, students will be able to:

- 1 describe or define concepts and cosmological terms from the syllabus and so demonstrate a broad awareness of simple concepts in cosmology;
- 2 solve elementary problems in basic cosmology;
- 3 summarise scientific information and concepts and draw conclusions;
- 4 use library or online resources to research a scientific topic;
- 5 collate material from a variety of sources and write a coherent essay in this subject area.



example 1.2

Learning outcomes: level 2 module

On successful completion of this module, students will be able to:

- 1 describe the contents and discuss the complexities of the overall structure of the Milky Way;

(Continued)

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- 2 explain the physical principles and processes involved in the Galaxy's evolution and relate them to its present-day structure;
- 3 solve numerical problems in this subject area (for example, relating to the dynamics of the component stars or involving the interplay of a number of physical processes);
- 4 plan, research and produce a structured scientific essay in this subject area;
- 5 analyse conceptual problems, make inferences and provide reasoned arguments to justify the conclusions drawn.

**example 1.3****Learning outcomes: level 3 module**

On successful completion of this module, students will be able to:

- 1 analyse the scientific motivation for current initiatives in astronomy research;
- 2 analyse how scientific objectives drive the planning and development of major research programmes;
- 3 prepare a critical literature review of a current research topic;
- 4 critically assess information and concepts and draw conclusions from them;
- 5 use IT resources at a high level to deliver a scientifically mature seminar;
- 6 summarise and communicate scientific ideas.

(Examples 1.1–1.3 are from the module catalogue *studyastronomy.com* of the School of Computing, Engineering and Physical Sciences, University of Central Lancashire, available at www.studyastronomy.com/uploads/files/modulecatalogue.pdf, accessed 15 January 2009.)

Note the verbs used in the descriptions of the learning outcomes in the examples. Learning outcomes are not written arbitrarily: they are based on theories about how knowledge is acquired. The verbs describe what students are capable of doing cognitively or intellectually if they succeed in the assignments set for each level. You will notice, for example, that the Level 1 outcomes

use verbs like ‘describe or define’; at Level 2, ‘describe ... and discuss’; and at Level 3, ‘analyse’ and ‘critically assess’. Essay questions are also set using these verbs, as you will see in Chapter 2.

The ‘Reflection and Review’ section on p. 23 provides further reading to help you understand the concept of learning outcomes and the different levels of learning (for example, Bloom’s taxonomy of the cognitive domain).

Learning expectations and marking criteria

The learning outcomes of a course set out what students will be able to do if they pass the assessments set for the course. Learning expectations are what tutors expect from student assessments to show that they have achieved the learning outcomes, and the extent to which they are judged to have done so will be reflected in the marks awarded for each assignment.

Tutors will usually explain these expectations by providing their students with a Marking Criteria guide, which also clarifies how the marks correspond to the criteria. Be sure you understand the marking criteria for each piece of written work, as these may vary from course to course.

What does your mark mean? Generally, essays are marked out of 100 per cent and the mark divisions correspond to the degree classes as shown below:

Table 1.3 Degree class percentages

Mark	Degree class	Characteristics
70% and above	Class 1	Distinction, excellent – has met all the criteria and achieved all the learning outcomes.
60–69%	Class 2.1	Good, above average – has met most of the criteria and achieved most of the learning outcomes.
50–59%	Class 2.2	Satisfactory, average – has met the essential criteria and achieved some of the learning outcomes.
40–49%	Class 3	Below average – has met some of the criteria but has not achieved some of the essential learning outcomes.
Below 40%	Fail	Has not met most of the criteria and not achieved the essential learning outcomes.

Essay Marking Criteria What are the ‘criteria’ mentioned above? A Marking Criteria guide will normally cite the following criteria:

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- *Relevance*: of the answer to the question, or whether it has been fully understood and answered.
- *Knowledge*: accuracy of information, appropriateness of facts and ideas, breadth of reading and use of literature.
- *Analysis*: of evidence – appropriateness and quality of argumentation and critical evaluation.
- *Argument and Structure*: the structure and organisation of the main argument in the essay.
- *Originality*: of ideas, aims, approaches, conclusions; independent thinking.
- *Presentation*: quality of writing (style, spelling, punctuation, grammar and referencing).

An essay may not meet all the criteria to the same degree and thus the final mark may be based on an overall assessment of its strengths and weaknesses against the different criteria. Obviously, if an essay does not answer the question posed at all, it will fail – no matter how well written it may be.

Tutors use guidelines to assess the criteria for marking essays and also to explain and justify the mark allocated. Table 1.4 on pages 21–22 shows how one course uses a grid for such a purpose. This grid explains how the overall final mark was arrived at by describing performance against each criterion. If you know what the criteria are, you can evaluate your essay before you hand it in to make sure you have done your best to satisfy them. You will also be able to learn from your mistakes when you receive feedback on how well you performed against each criterion and to seek specific help or support to improve if necessary.

The relevance of academic writing

The words *theoretical* and *academic* are sometimes used pejoratively in the sense of ‘irrelevant’ or ‘of no practical value’. And it is true that unless you choose to remain in academic circles, you might never again have to write another essay once you graduate. In reality, however, and particularly if you are able to adopt the deep approach to learning, the skills you develop when writing at university will all be transferable to and desirable in your future life and career. These include research skills, logical and critical thinking skills, clear expression, independent learning, communication skills, organisational skills, time and task management skills, self-awareness, reflective skills, and many others. Contrary to popular opinion, therefore, academic writing is a highly relevant aspect of self-development.

Table 1.4 Essay marking criteria

Mark	Relevance	Analysis	Argument and Structure	Originality	Knowledge	Language/Presentation
70% and above	Directly relevant to the task; also able to address the implications, assumptions and nuances of the topic.	In-depth analysis of the evidence, arguments or other material considered, resulting in clear and illuminating conclusions.	Coherent and logical structure, making creative use of an appropriate mode of argument and/or theoretical models(s).	Distinctive work, showing independent thought and critical engagement with alternative views.	Makes effective use of an excellent knowledge base and shows thorough understanding of relevant material.	Very well written with standard spelling and syntax, lucid and resourceful style, and appropriate format and bibliography.
60–69%	Directly relevant to the task.	Good analysis, clear and orderly.	Generally coherent and logically structured; appropriate mode of argument and/or theoretical model(s).	May contain some distinctive or independent thinking; may begin to formulate an independent position.	A substantial knowledge of relevant material showing a clear grasp of themes, questions and issues.	Well written with standard spelling and syntax, a readable style, and acceptable format and bibliography.
50–59%	Some attempt to address the task; some less focused parts.	Some analytical treatment, but may be prone to description or to narrative which lacks clear analytical purpose.	Some attempt to construct a coherent argument, but may suffer loss of focus and consistency, with issues stated vaguely or model(s) couched in simplistic terms.	Sound work but expresses a personal position only in broad terms and in uncritical conformity to one or more standard views of the topic.	Adequate knowledge of a fair range of relevant material with intermittent evidence of an appreciation of its significance.	Competently written with only minor lapses in syntax and spelling, with acceptable format and bibliography.

(Continued)

Table 1.4 (Continued)

<i>Mark</i>	<i>Relevance</i>	<i>Analysis</i>	<i>Argument and Structure</i>	<i>Originality</i>	<i>Knowledge</i>	<i>Language/Presentation</i>
40–49%	Relevance to the topic intermittent; issues reduced to their vaguest and least challenging terms.	Largely descriptive or narrative, with little evidence of analytical skill.	A basic argument may be evident, but tends to be supported by assertion only and lacking clarity and coherence.	Largely derivative; no personal view is adequately formed.	Limited understanding of a narrow range of material.	Poorly written, with significant deficiencies in expression, format and bibliography that may hinder the reader.
0–39%	Complete irrelevance to requirements.	Inadequate and often inaccurate description and paraphrase.	No evidence of coherent argument or structure.	No evidence of personal thought; cursory paraphrase/quotation, or mostly plagiarised.	Lack of basic knowledge necessary for understanding of the topic.	Mostly garbled and negligently presented.



chapter summary

- You are expected to communicate effectively in academic writing.
- Different types of academic writing will make different demands.
- Essay writing is a process and each stage is purposeful.
- The process is cyclical and develops the learning as well as the writing experience.
- It is necessary to understand the criteria used for marking your essay in order to understand the mark awarded and to learn from the feedback.



reflection and review

The activities and suggestions that follow invite you to review the current skills, preferences or approaches you have in relation to writing; Activity 5 explains learning outcomes and learning levels with reference to Bloom's taxonomy and Activity 6 offers suggestions for starting to develop a proactive way of learning to write independently while at university.

1: Current writing skills

Rate how good you are in the following skills needed for essay writing at university from 1 (= poor) to 5 (= excellent):

- 1 taking and making notes from reading
- 2 reading critically
- 3 analysing essay questions
- 4 organising information
- 5 structuring an essay
- 6 writing good paragraphs
- 7 writing good introductions and conclusions
- 8 using critical analysis in your writing
- 9 writing in an appropriate academic style
- 10 referencing
- 11 writing a bibliography
- 12 revising and editing your work
- 13 writing exam essays.

(Continued)

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From your ratings, what can you conclude about your essay writing skills? How would you go about developing those skills that you have rated as poor?

2: SWOT analysis

SWOT (**S**trengths, **W**eaknesses, **O**pportunities, **T**hreats) analysis was developed as a tool for assessing the environment of a business to enable decision making and development. It is used here as a means to assess your own personal environment and how this affects your learning and writing in an academic situation.

- *Strengths* include any relevant experience and know-how which you possess, as well as personal qualities.
- *Weaknesses* may be negative experiences and beliefs with regard to learning and writing, or the lack of certain skills.
- *Opportunities* are resources available at university and elsewhere and life and study opportunities to help you succeed.
- *Threats* include any circumstances and situations that may hinder your will or ability to succeed.

Note that strengths and weaknesses are personal factors. These can be harnessed, managed or changed. Opportunities and threats are external circumstances or forces. They include factors like health or responsibilities which may be outside your control.

Table 1.5 SWOT analysis for developing academic learning and writing skills

Strengths: my qualities, experience, knowledge	Weaknesses: what I do not have confidence in; any negative attitudes
Opportunities: what is available to help me; what will open up to me if I succeed	Threats: what can hinder and weaken my chances of success

Work on your Weaknesses; utilise your Strengths; make use of Opportunities to cultivate and motivate yourself; minimise Threats by pre-empting them.

3: Time management

Your university webpages will probably have tips about time management. This is an important aspect of being a successful student – you must be able to manage the deadlines for all your assessments and everything that completing them entails. Manchester University: (see www.humanities.manchester.ac.uk/studyskills/time_management/ accessed 19 May 2009) has some useful information on this.

In addition, to begin with, a good strategy would be to analyse how you actually use your time. Draw a 24/7 grid like the one in Table 1.6 and fill it in conscientiously for a couple of weeks. Include everything you do for every hour of

Table 1.6 24/7 Time monitor

Time Day	a.m.												p.m.											
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
Mon																								
Tues																								
Weds																								
Thurs																								
Fri																								
Sat																								
Sun																								

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each day. Then look at how you spent your time and reflect on what was time-wasting and how you could cut down on this.

4: Learning Styles: Felder–Silverman

In 1988, a Learning Styles Model was developed by two educationists called Felder and Silverman. The model details eight learning styles on four axes. The four axes can be mapped onto four stages of learning (Doing, Reviewing, Concluding, Planning). When you are faced with new information, how do you prefer to approach it: learn it, use it, make it your own? On each axis, you will fall into one of the two learner types and will also have a preference for one axis on which to operate.

Table 1.7 The Felder–Silverman Learning Styles Model

Axis	Learner type	Learner type
1 Sensing or Intuitive (experiencing new information mode) DOING	Sensing (SEN) Likes: learning facts, solving problems in a straightforward way Dislikes: complications, surprises	Intuitive (INT) Likes: discovering connections and possibilities, innovation Dislikes: repetition, drawn out explanations
2 Visual or Verbal (presentation of new information mode) REVIEWING	Visual (VIS) Likes: being able to see – pictures, diagrams, charts, films, demonstrations	Verbal (VRB) Likes: words – both written and spoken
3 Active or Reflective (making sense of new information mode) CONCLUDING	Active (ACT) Likes: doing something with the information; working in groups	Reflective (REF) Likes: thinking about the information by him/herself; working alone
4 Global or Sequential (structuring new information mode) PLANNING	Global (GLO) Likes: learning in big jumps; knowing the big picture first	Sequential (SEQ) Likes: learning in logical, linear steps

(Adapted from: University of Central Lancashire's Employability Pack)

Go to the website sponsored by the North Carolina State University for its faculty and students. Dr Richard Felder's webpage provides a very comprehensive discussion of learning styles (http://www4.ncsu.edu/unity/lockers/users/f/felder/public/Learning_Styles.html accessed 17 January 2009). Find the page called *Index of Learning Styles* and do the test. When you submit this, a results sheet will be generated for you which will describe the type of learner you are. You can then click on *Learning Styles Description* and you will be told how you can improve your learning.

There are various other learning styles questionnaires and inventories which are available in some study skills textbooks as well as online, and the website www.businessballs.com is a useful resource if you are interested in learning theories and learning styles.

5: Levels of learning: Bloom's taxonomy

The table below is adapted from W. Bloom et al.'s taxonomy of the cognitive domain. You will be in a much better position to understand what is expected of you when you write an essay if you have a fuller understanding of what underlies those expectations. Bloom's taxonomy sets out what is now widely accepted by educators as the basis for planning courses and writing learning objectives and outcomes, and by tutors for setting essay questions. It is named after the educator who developed it. A taxonomy is a kind of categorisation.

In the table below, reading down, there are six levels of cognition in the left-hand column. The column in the middle explains what each means, and the other column contains samples of verbs used for writing learning outcomes (as above), and also those that are often used in essay questions. The table sets out what is expected when operating at each cognitive level. As students progress from their first to their final years, they will move through all the levels and will be assessed to ascertain their ability for each one. Level 1 is the most basic level, level 6 the most advanced.

Table 1.8 Bloom's Taxonomy of the Cognitive Domain

<i>LEVEL</i> (6 = most complex; 1 = least complex)	<i>EXPLANATION</i>	<i>SAMPLE VERBS</i>	
6. EVALUATION	Appraises, assesses, or critiques on the basis of specific standards and criteria	judge recommend	critique justify
5. SYNTHESIS	Originates, integrates, and combines ideas into a product, plan or proposal	create design	develop
4. ANALYSIS	Distinguishes, classifies and relates the assumptions, hypotheses, evidence or structure of a statement or question	analyse categorise	compare contrast
3. APPLICATION	Selects, transfers and uses data and principles to complete a problem or task	solve demonstrate	apply construct
2. COMPREHENSION	Translates, comprehends or interprets information based on prior learning	explain summarise paraphrase	describe illustrate
1. KNOWLEDGE	Recalls or recognises information, ideas, and principles	list name	state define

(Adapted from: Huitt, W. (2004) Bloom et al.'s taxonomy of the cognitive domain. Educational Psychology Interactive. Valdosta, GA: Valdosta State University. Retrieved [14 November 2008], from <http://chiron.valdosta.edu/whuitt/col/cogsys/bloom.html>)

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6: Writing Information File

Here is a suggestion for something you can do to enable you to relate information from this book to your own course and use it for your own needs: start a 'Writing Information File' for your modules. Collect whatever information you think is relevant to understanding what is required of you at this point, and also any useful writing resources. Here are some examples:

- module handbooks – read these and then ask questions about what is not clear;
- collate information for essay writing assignments;
- note the differences in expectations;
- list any useful university sources;
- list any useful web sources;
- look at the types of writing required on your course and find some samples from the library or archives in your department or from your tutors.

**further reading**

Morley-Warner, T. (2000) *Academic Writing is ...* Sydney: CREA Publications.