Academic Writing and Grammar for Students

2nd Edition

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Introduction

The Aims of this Book and How to Use It

Writing at university

Writing essays and assignments is difficult. I imagine many of my readers agree with that statement. Understanding what is expected of you at university level, and then meeting these high academic standards, are daunting skills. In fact, you’ll never be finished: it is always possible to improve your essay-writing skills, and to make your written work more effective.

What is more, writing effective, high-quality assignments should be difficult. Being able to write essays on complex topics to a high standard is a skill worth having. Studying at university gives you the perfect opportunity to develop it. Of course, you must also develop these skills to get the marks needed to pass your course!

One of the things that makes this even more difficult (apart from the wide range of challenges that come with studying in higher education) is the fact that you are expected to develop these skills while you are studying for your degree: a whole, complex subject.

At university, you’re expected to develop in-depth knowledge and analytical skills in fields like, for example, business, computing, creative writing or philosophy, and, in addition, the writing skills to express this knowledge effectively.

My experience working in higher education has taught me that most students are eager to spend time developing their writing skills – as well as other academic skills, such as effective presenting, statistics and time management.

Because these skills will be developed while you are studying an academic subject, you want to be sure that this time is spent wisely. This is true of all time spent on studying.

Take this situation, for example: if you went to see your personal tutor to discuss a part of her most recent lecture, you would want to make the most
of the appointment time you had. You would hope to come away with some meaningful, practical advice.

‘Meaningful, practical advice’ is a phrase that neatly summarises what I hope this book provides. The book’s focus is relatively narrow compared with other books about study skills. The spotlight is largely directed at the basic concepts behind the grammar of academic English, and the conventions of academic writing. More advanced chapters discuss specific techniques to make your writing effective.

By keeping this focus clear and strong throughout the book, I hope to: help you develop your essay writing; make it more effective; and make you aware of the common mistakes or issues that can often lead to lost marks (but, with a bit of work, don’t have to).

When the book’s focus does become slightly wider (the chapters on critical thinking and referencing, for example), the aim is still to provide to-the-point, practical advice that you can quickly apply to your own written work. The techniques discussed in chapters like this are still those that are vital for improving the quality of the sentences and paragraphs on the pages you write.

This book, then, sticks pretty closely to your writing itself – to the phrases, words and paragraphs on the page. You will find a range of books that tackle academic skills more generally. They might talk more about the planning process, about the structure of assignments and, even further from the printed page, how to give presentations or manage your time.

Many of the books that discuss these things are excellent, but to keep my advice practical I have deliberately chosen a focus that I think matches many of the concerns students have while studying, especially early on in their studies.

I won’t dwell on definitions for ‘essay’ and ‘assignment’, two words I use almost interchangeably. The rules of academic writing apply across all subjects, and although you will be asked to do different things in your assignments, similar things are expected of you. Any piece of written work longer than, say, 250 words is what this book calls an essay or assignment.

Another word I use throughout the book, and one I do want to define quickly, is ‘argument’.

‘Argument’ in this sense doesn’t mean a specific debate between two or more people around the kitchen table or at the pub! (That said, academia is all about debate; debate based on reason, however – not emotion.)

That more common definition of argument actually comes from the classical idea – argument as a process of reasoning: that is, using evidence and logic to reach a conclusion. That sounds exactly like what should be happening in your essays, doesn’t it?

In fact, the nature of writing, studying and learning at Western universities borrows much from classical Greek ideas. Using reason to convince your audience (in this case, your readers) of something (in this case, your
answer or response to the essay question or assignment brief) is one of these concepts.

‘Critical thinking’ is another idea, a vital one while studying at university, which is descended from this classical tradition. Critical thinking is a frame of mind in which you analyse your research, don’t take anything for granted and look at all sides of other arguments before reaching your own conclusion.

In Western higher education, this frame of mind, or this way of thinking, is the goal. This is opposed to simple memorisation of facts, and using essays to try to prove to the reader that you’ve done this memorisation. The book does not focus on critical thinking throughout, but there is a chapter that examines this topic, and how to use other sources in our work, in some detail.

In summary, when you read the word ‘argument’, I mean not just your essay as a whole, but your specific sequence of logical ideas, with their supporting evidence. This should all be written in a way that convinces your reader that your answer to the essay question is a valid, thoughtful one.

The basic idea behind learning in a British university, and what you are ultimately trying to do, is summarised neatly by Martin:

**WHAT YOUR TUTORS SAY**

‘Seek to understand, rather than memorise facts’ – Martin, Maths lecturer

In your essays, you are trying to demonstrate that you understand the key ideas underpinning your subject, not that you are particularly good at memorising dates, names or places. Chapter 5 on critical thinking looks at specific techniques to help you demonstrate this, but it is a useful idea to have in the back of your mind as you read on.

Because you are trying to demonstrate a complex, high level of thinking, your writing should be simple and clear – another key theme this book will mention repeatedly!

**What’s in this book?**

Below are summaries of each chapter. Seeing a brief explanation of the topics included in each chapter, and the order they’re in, should help make the book’s overall direction clear.

After this introduction, you’ll read about:
Basic conventions of academic writing

There are certain rules you must follow in academic writing, and some conventions you have to stick to. There are reasons for this, which the chapter will make clear. Before getting stuck into complex grammatical issues, it will be useful to start with some of the rules you need to get your head around when writing essays.

Basic grammatical concepts

This chapter outlines some of the basic grammatical rules you should be comfortable with. The aim is not to learn hundreds of grammatical terms or memorise complex definitions. Instead, the focus is on understanding some fundamental rules, explained with examples from academic writing. You can then make sure to follow these rules, and to put the techniques to practical use in your work.

Putting sentences together

Basic grammar doesn’t do much good unless you are actually writing whole sentences! This chapter builds on the previous two by looking at constructing effective, grammatically correct academic sentences – applying the rules and conventions you’ve already learned.

Putting paragraphs together

After discussing how sentences are put together, the next logical step is to look at how to arrange these sentences to make effective, well-written paragraphs. Some of the rules and ideas in this chapter are similar to those in the preceding one; however, there are also plenty of important additional techniques to bear in mind when writing paragraphs. They will be discussed here.

Critical thinking

‘Critical thinking’ is a broad term that refers to a certain way of thinking about the sources or texts you’re reading as part of your studies. For clarity, I’ve separated the mechanics of referencing from how we effectively bring our
research into our own writing and our own arguments – which is dealt with in this section.

As such, this chapter is intended to provide a practical introduction to integrating what you read into your own work in an effective, thoughtful and honest way.

**Referencing**

This chapter is a continuation of the previous one. Referencing your research correctly is a vital part of academic writing. Referencing is the **practical** or **technical** set of steps to show your reader exactly how and where you’ve used your sources.

**Conciseness and clarity**

The chapters up to this point have focused on aspects of academic writing that could be called **essential**. It is **essential** that you follow the academic conventions in Chapter 1; to get your sentences right it is **essential** that you apply the grammar rules from Chapter 2.

This chapter provides ideas, rather than rules, to help the development of your own writing and to make it **effective beyond** the essentials.

These key ideas, illustrated with examples, serve as a starting point. The techniques outlined in this chapter help make writing clear (effective and to the point) and concise (using only the necessary words to make an appropriate point). You’ll learn that you have various techniques at your disposal. As you develop as a writer, you’ll improve at using these techniques appropriately.

**Common mistakes and how to deal with them**

My experience giving students guidance on their written work has highlighted certain mistakes and issues that appear too commonly in assignments. These mistakes are made by students at all levels of study and ability. This chapter tackles the main ones, with examples and solutions for each.

I hope that you can dip in and out of this chapter and find something to double-check in your own work. Because I’ve based this chapter on my extensive experience of reading many different kinds of academic writing, I’m confident that it effectively deals with problems and issues that, in most cases, can be avoided quite easily.
Proofreading effectively

This chapter provides guidance on a vital, but often neglected, part of the writing process: proofreading your work. This chapter discusses techniques to help you ensure that your work is ready for submission, and ready for others to read.

Notes on the text and the conventions I follow

The final part of this chapter highlights a few things you need to be aware of as you read this book. It focuses on the conventions and techniques I use in the following chapters.

Different subjects

The examples of academic writing I use come from a range of different academic subjects. I wrote all of them myself, and as such you should not treat them as factual representations of any topic.

Similarly, all the references I use in the examples are made up. Your focus should be on applying the ideas that the examples demonstrate. Learn specific techniques from the examples and think about using them in your own work. Don’t look for actual content in any of my examples.

Most of the actual ideas and themes discussed in this book, and the key points I make, apply to academic writing on any subject. Whether you are studying social care or sports psychology, computer science or creative writing, law or linguistics, physics or physiotherapy (I have taught academic writing sessions to all the subjects I’ve just named), the principles behind academic writing will be the same.

Referencing

In my example sentences and paragraphs, I use the Harvard referencing system. As you’ll discover in Chapter 6, there are many different referencing styles or systems. More detail will be provided on some of them. There are also principles that apply to all referencing styles.

Put simply, Harvard referencing involves including the surnames of the authors of your source material in parentheses (round brackets). These parentheses go inside sentences at appropriate points in your text, along with the year the source material was published.
For the sake of simplicity, I wanted to choose one style and stick with it. I use the Harvard style because it is relatively simple and used by many UK universities across a range of subjects. As mentioned above, all the references I use are fictional and I use them to demonstrate writing techniques only. In most cases the names of authors I use are fictional.

**Key point**

It's important that you bear in mind that the writing in this book doesn't strictly follow all the conventions of academic writing that I tell you about. This book is not an essay. Additionally, it is not an academic text in the same way most of your textbooks are.

To maintain a friendly and accessible tone, there are some techniques I use that you should avoid in your essays.

Because this is such an important fact, I will repeat it at appropriate points throughout the book.

To summarise, however, so you have an idea going forward:

I use the second person 'you' to address my readers throughout the book. As you'll learn in the next chapter, this is not acceptable in academic writing.

Similarly, I use the first person 'I' and 'my' to refer to myself. This is something to avoid in most essays. Some subjects involve a kind of writing called 'reflective' writing, in which the author of an essay discusses their own experiences in an academic context. Outside of this particular type of academic writing, however, the first person and references to yourself as the author of a piece of work should not appear.

You should not use 'contractions', in which words are joined together, and letters removed, to be replaced with an apostrophe. For example, 'won't' is the contracted form of 'will not'. I use some contractions to maintain this sense of friendliness that would not be appropriate in an academic essay.

Finally, I use some phrases that could be deemed colloquial; some that might even be considered slang.

**Key point**

I use 'Key point' boxes like the one you can see above throughout the book. They emphasise certain key ideas or points, or highlight specific examples of a certain technique. Some chapters have several boxes like this, and some of them have only a few.

I don't have any specific rules for each box, and I hope everything I've written is important. However, if I think a certain point should stand out from the rest of the text it'll appear in a box like this.
WHAT YOUR TUTORS SAY

Throughout the book, you’ll also see these ‘What your tutors say’ boxes. Experienced academics who teach a range of subjects (I give the subject with their name) have kindly provided me with their thoughts and tips on many of the things I write about in this book. I only use first names in the text itself, but you can find more information about who they are in the Acknowledgements.

These brief quotations give you the chance to hear from the kinds of people who will actually be marking your work. In most cases, I use the quotes from the lecturers to begin a discussion of my own, or to reinforce a point I am making. This actually parallels the kind of thing you should aim to do when you reference other sources.

Now that I’ve introduced the topic, let’s get on with it!