



Academic Writing Skills
Study Guide
School of Health and Social Work

University of
Hertfordshire



Why read this study guide?

This study guide covers all the main points you need to know about successful academic writing. Communicating effectively through your writing is one of the keys to becoming a successful student. Following the tips and advice in the guide will help you to express your thoughts clearly and effectively, giving you the best chance of achieving good marks for your written work.

The Guide is divided into 6 sections:

1. Parts of speech
2. Grammar and punctuation
3. Structuring an essay
4. Argument and reasoning
5. Proofreading
6. Useful tips

You can find further advice and guidance on our Academic Skills Advice website at <http://academic-skills.health.herts.ac.uk/>

We hope you find both the guide and the website useful, and that your writing continues to develop and improve as you progress through your programme of study.

Wishing you every success in your academic work,

The Academic Skills Advice Team
School of Health and Social Work



Parts of Speech

To write effectively, you need to be know what kind of words are used to form speech.

Noun

A noun is an object or a thing, such as a 'desk', 'phone' and 'mug'. A 'proper noun' is the actual name of the object or thing (if it has its own name), such as the 'University of Hertfordshire', 'Students' Union', or 'England'. Proper nouns start with a capital letter to show that what is being referred to is the actual, or *proper*, name. For example, there are lots of universities (noun), but only one University of Hertfordshire (proper noun).

Pronoun

Pronouns are words that are used in place of a noun, such as 'he', 'she', 'it', 'him', and 'her'. Pronouns are used to avoid repetition of the noun while ensuring that none of the meaning of the sentence is lost. For example, the sentence, 'Neto is friendly; he always smiles when I see him' is much better than 'Neto is friendly; Neto always smiles when I see Neto'.

Adjective

An adjective is a word that describes a noun, making it more specific and identifiable. For example, the brown, wooden desk or the slim, metallic phone. In the example, brown, wooden, slim and metallic, are all words that describe what the noun (desk, phone) is like.

Verb

Verbs are commonly described as 'doing' or 'action' words. They describe what the nouns in the sentence are doing, e.g. running, thinking, eating. In the sentence, 'Izzy is walking to the bus stop', 'walking' is the verb.

Adverb

An adverb is a describing word for verbs, adjectives and other adverbs. 'Quickly', 'angrily' and 'kindly' are all adverbs. They make the action of the verb more specific. In the sentence, 'the man talked loudly', the verb is 'talked' (what the man is doing) and the adverb is 'loudly' (how the man is doing it).

Preposition

Prepositions are words or phrases such as: 'to', 'from', 'into', 'out', 'of', 'in', 'under', 'by', 'with', 'before', and 'after'.

In the sentence, 'After finishing my shift, I got onto the bus and became stuck in traffic', 'onto' and 'in' are both prepositions: 'onto' describes movement and 'in' describes position.

In the phrase, 'On Tuesday, ...', 'On' is the preposition.

It is important to use prepositions correctly to make your meaning clear:

Example:

'He stood in the stage.'

In this example, the preposition describing his position on the stage is incorrect. He should be standing 'on' the stage, not in it!

It is useful to learn some combinations of words and prepositions commonly found in academic writing, such as: different from; to result in; to refer to; to contribute to; to be consistent with; to focus on; to distinguish between; to depend on; and to benefit from.

Grammar and Punctuation

Together, good punctuation and grammar act as a vehicle for delivering your message clearly. Without it, your lecturer will need to work much harder to understand the points you are making.

Poor use of punctuation and grammar is one of the commonest reasons that students find themselves unable to improve their grades beyond 'satisfactory' or 'good'.

Syntax

'Syntax' is the word used to describe sentence structure. A well-ordered sentence makes the meaning clear, whereas a poorly structured sentence obscures the meaning.

Example:

'Ordering the key words and phrases in a sentence takes some thinking about. Try changing the order of the words if you are struggling to get the meaning right'.

'Think about the best way to order the key words and phrases in your sentences. If you are struggling to make your meaning clear, try changing the order of the words'.

Tense

Tenses, e.g. past, present, future, can be difficult to get right, especially if English is not your first language.

When you are introducing and discussing other people's opinions, use the present tense, e.g. 'Portway believes' or 'Stein states' rather than 'Portway believed' or 'Stein stated'.

By putting them in the past tense, their opinions can seem out of date; it also suggests that their views may have changed, which can weaken your argument. However, there are times when

it is appropriate to use the past tense, e.g. if the person in question has been dead for a long time. At other times the present tense can work well, especially if you want to be assertive and confident, e.g. 'The purpose of this essay is to explore...' or 'This essay explores...'.

Aim for overall consistency in your use of tense as switching between tenses can be confusing for the reader and will reduce the fluency of your writing.

Colons and semi-colons

Colons and semi-colons may look similar, but they are actually very different. Used properly they can help you to express complicated ideas clearly, although you should only use them if you are confident to do so.

The semi-colon is used to link two sentences which are closely related in subject matter, but which can stand alone as separate sentences.

Example: 'The woman stood up quickly and then fell to the floor; she hurt herself badly.'

The colon can be used in several ways. For example, to separate an idea or a claim, from the explanation of that idea or claim.

Example: 'Simone has one dream: She dreams of becoming a therapist'.

Colons can also be used to introduce a list.

Example:

The price includes the following: flight to Italy, conference accommodation, and gala dinner.

Sometimes they are used before a quotation, and sometimes before direct speech.

Examples:

The banner read: 'Save our NHS'.

They shouted: 'Our children are starving!'

Apostrophes

Apostrophes are most commonly used to indicate ownership of a noun but they are often used incorrectly.

Example: 'His mothers' house was big enough for all the puppy's'.

In this sentence, 'mothers' should be 'mother's' because the house belongs to his mother not to lots of mothers. 'Puppy's' should be the plural form 'puppies' because there are lots of them and they do not own anything in the sentence (and so they do not get an apostrophe!).

Apostrophes can completely obscure the meaning of a sentence if used incorrectly.

A general rule to follow is that the apostrophe goes before the 's' if the noun is singular (e.g. the girl's crisps meaning the crisps belonging to the girl), and after the 's' if the noun is plural (e.g. the girls' crisps meaning the crisps belonging to the girls).

Apostrophes are also used to show that a letter is missing, e.g. 'It's nothing to do with him' instead of 'It is nothing to do with him'. These are called contractions and they should be avoided in academic work.

Speech marks

Speech marks indicate the beginning and end of reported (quoted) speech.

Example:

In his inaugural speech, the new Health Minister said, "This level of funding is unsustainable".

Speech marks are only used when reporting something that was said (spoken) not when reporting something that has been expressed in writing. Most academic quotations will therefore require inverted commas, not speech marks.

Singular and plural

Nouns can be singular or plural. For example, there may be one service-user (singular), or there may be many service-users (plural). Whenever there is more than one of a thing (a noun), it should be expressed as a plural. Plural nouns frequently have 's' at the end of the word.

Examples: dogs, cats, tables, books, computers.

When writing in the singular and plural, you must make sure that your nouns and verbs match, e.g. 'the bird flies' or 'the birds fly'. If there is only one bird, it flies, but if there are two or more, they fly!

Excess baggage

Academic writing that is concise, objective and to the point, is much easier to follow than writing that is full of unnecessary (superfluous) words or repetitive phrases. Another way of describing this kind of writing might be to say it has 'had the fat trimmed off'. This means that the author has selected to use only those words that are necessary to make their point clearly and has removed any additional, unnecessary ones.

When reading through your work, ask yourself whether each word is necessary and whether it is the best word to use. Writing concisely requires you to know the right words to use to express yourself clearly and precisely. For example, do not write 'very essential' or 'very crucial'. Saying 'essential' or 'crucial' is more than enough! Reading widely, especially research and scholarly articles, will help to extend your vocabulary considerably.

Once you have found the right words to use there is no need to add extra words with the same or a similar meaning (no excess baggage please!).

Example of 'excess baggage':

'I feel being reflective has enabled me to learn more including learning from my practice and learning from my peers. Overall, being reflective

has helped me to develop a learning mind-set which has been a learning experience in-itself.'

In summary, good academic writing has 'no excess baggage on board'. It also shouldn't include metaphors like 'trim the fat off' and 'excess baggage'!

Did you know?

Tautology means: Needless repetition of an idea using different words or phrases.

Pleonasm means: The use of more words than are necessary for the expression of an idea.

Informality

The increase in informal methods of written communication, such as email, text, and instant messaging, has contributed to a rise in the use of informal and colloquial (everyday) language in essays.

Example: 'Basically, the law is talking about improving the quality of social services...'

The word 'basically' is inappropriate for academic writing, the purpose of which is to explore complex concepts and issues. Terms like 'in essence' or 'to summarise', are more appropriate.

The use of the word 'talking' is unsuitable because the law is a concept and concepts are not capable of talking! Words that could be used instead include state, articulate or describe.

Sentences

Try to express a single idea or point in each sentence, and a single theme or focus in each paragraph. Your aim is to deliver a clear message to your reader, not to confuse them with *an excessively long trail of meaningless, unfathomable and impenetrable words...*

A good tip is to read your work out loud to listen for where the pauses naturally fall. If reading out loud leaves you breathless, you probably need to make some amendments. Try shortening your sentences and/or introducing commas, semi colons or colons, to break the sentences into manageable (and understandable) lengths of text.

Commas

Commas are used to separate parts of a sentence, usually to indicate a brief pause. Used correctly they can transform a sentence from one that doesn't quite make sense to one that makes a point or argument very clear.

Below are just some examples of the many ways in which commas can be used.

To separate words and word groups in a simple series of three or more items.

Example:

In the end, I bought bread, peanut butter, bananas, and milk.

It would be incorrect to write:

In the end I bought bread peanut butter bananas and milk.

To separate two adjectives when the order of the adjectives is inter-changeable.

Example: She is a tall, healthy woman. We could also say healthy, tall woman.

Commas can also be used in pairs to cordon off information that is an aside, explanation or addition.

Example:

The boy could, with a little help, write his name and telephone number.

The dependent clause ‘with a little help’ can be removed and the remaining sentence will still make sense.

A dependent clause is a group of words with a subject and a verb. A dependent clause cannot stand alone in a sentence, it is dependent on being attached to an independent clause to form a sentence.

‘After he ran to the hospital’ is a dependent clause, i.e. it requires an additional group of words such as ‘he entered the ward’, to complete the sentence.

‘He ran to the hospital’ and ‘He entered the ward’ are both independent clauses, which means they can each stand alone as a sentence.

If two independent clauses are separated by a comma, it is called a run-on sentence or ‘comma splice’. Comma splicing should be avoided.

Example: He ran to the hospital, he entered the ward.

There are several remedies:

He ran to the hospital. He entered the ward.
After he ran to the hospital, he entered the ward.

He ran to the hospital, and he entered the ward.

Pronouns

See ‘Parts of Speech’ for a definition of pronouns. A common mistake in writing is to mismatch pronoun and nouns in a sentence. Check what you have written, is it the right gender? Is it first, second, or third person?

Example:

She was working on **her** presentation.

He was ready for **their** feedback about **his** work.

The definite article

The ‘definite article’ is otherwise known as ‘the’. Although correct use of the definite article is a common problem among students who do not have English as a first language, it is becoming more common among native English speakers too.

It is important to learn when to use the definite article, ‘the’, and the indefinite article such as ‘a’ or ‘an’. The definite article is used when you are referring to something that is known to you or definite. The indefinite article is, as the word suggests, less specific.

Example:

The patient in the side room. This refers to a specific person.

A patient asked to go to the day room. This refers to an unknown patient.

Capital letters

Students often make mistakes in choosing when to use, or not use, capital letters. The rules are reasonably straight forward to learn, essentially that capital letters should only be used if the word is a ‘proper noun’ and not if it is a common noun.

Example:

She went to Beechdale Secondary School in St.Albans.

In the example, both the school and the town are specific ones with names that distinguish them from others, and so they are capitalised.

Alternatively, the sentence might have read ‘She went to secondary school in a local town’ in which case there would be no need for capitals.

Using ‘and’ instead of ‘to’

It is a common mistake to use ‘and’ instead of ‘to’, e.g. ‘I want to try and learn to swim’ instead of ‘I want to try to learn to swim’.

Structuring an Essay

A well-structured essay makes it easier for your lecturer to follow your ideas and arguments.

Introduction

The introduction is your chance to 'set the scene' for the reader, showing why your topic is important and what issues or points you will be addressing in the main body of the essay. A good introduction shows the reader that you understand the essay question and that you have a plan for managing the answer.

You may need to define key terms and concepts in your introduction so that your reader is clear that you understand the topic you are about to embark on.

Main body

Use paragraphs to break your work into separate areas or topics. Present an idea or several linked ideas in each paragraph and offer supporting and alternative viewpoints to show that you have considered the issue from different perspectives.

Ensure that you signal at the beginning of the paragraph what it will be about and conclude the paragraph by delivering a summary message or main point that pulls together the various ideas that you have presented.

Read over your paragraph to ensure that it does not deviate into irrelevant topic areas or become repetitive. Remember, each paragraph should contain an explicit message or clearly argued position.

Make links between your paragraphs so that the reader can see the logical flow of the essay as you move from one issue or topic to the next.

'To try' is an infinitive verb, i.e. a 'to' verb, which needs an additional verb, such as 'learn', to qualify it. Using 'and' instead of 'to', means that there are two verbs (actions) at work in the sentence. The first action is 'trying'; the second action is 'learning'. Therefore, the author is effectively saying, 'I want to try (first action) and then I want to learn to swim (second action) ...'

Contractions

Words like 'can't' and 'shouldn't' are called contractions because they have been shortened in length by removing letters. In academic writing, you can't use 'can't' and shouldn't use 'shouldn't'. Write the words in full.

Abbreviations

If you are using abbreviations, e.g. NHS, make sure you write them out in full the first time you use them (National Health Service); you can then abbreviate thereafter.

Use 'for example' instead of 'e.g.', unless you are using e.g. or i.e. in parenthesis.

Choice of person

Academic writing is usually written from the third-person perspective. Writing in third-person means writing as an outsider looking in, and makes use of pronouns like 'he', 'she', 'it', or 'they'. It differs from the first-person, which uses pronouns such as 'I' and 'my', and from the second-person, which uses pronouns such as 'you' and 'yours'.

Writing from a first-person perspective is usually reserved for reflective pieces of work where you are required to share your personal perspective and experience.

Do not write in the second person. This means you should not be using 'you', 'your', yourself.

You might find it easier to divide your essay into headed sections to give you a structure to work with, but don't forget to remove the headings at the end (unless your assignment brief allows headings).

Conclusion

The conclusion is where you summarise the main arguments of your essay and provide a final concluding statement which should link back to the essay title. It should be clear why you have reached your conclusion and why it is of importance. Do not introduce any new information at this stage.

Reference list

The reference list should be presented according to the guidelines you have been given and should include all the sources you have referred to in your work. Take care to check back through the essay to ensure all the in-text citations are listed in the reference list.

A correctly presented reference lists is an easy way to get marks. A poorly presented, inaccurate or incomplete reference list is an easy way of losing marks!

Do not include a bibliography unless asked to.

Tips

If the essay title uses words like analyse, evaluate, compare and discuss, make sure that you do just that – this is what your marker will be looking for.

If you do not understand the assignment question or essay title, you will not be able to provide an answer to it. If in any doubt as to what you have been asked to do, check with your lecturer before you start writing.

Essay Checklist

Essay Title

- ✓ Have you used the correct essay title?

Introduction

- ✓ Does the introduction explain what the subject of the essay is?
- ✓ Are key words or concepts identified?
- ✓ Does the introduction set the scene for what will happen in the rest of the essay?

Main Body

- ✓ Does the main body show that you have read widely and deeply?
- ✓ Does each paragraph address a main point? Is each point and sub-point, supported by evidence?
- ✓ Are all sources of evidence correctly cited?
- ✓ Have you linked the paragraphs?

Conclusion

- ✓ Does the conclusion relate back to the essay question?
- ✓ Does it summarise the main points discussed in the essay?
- ✓ Does it provide a clear and concise concluding statement?

References

- ✓ Are all the sources used referenced?
- ✓ Are the in-text citations and reference list presented correctly?
- ✓ Are all the in-text citations shown in the reference list?
- ✓ Do all the sources in the reference list appear in the essay?

Presentation

- ✓ Is the essay presented according to the assignment guidelines?
- ✓ Have you kept within the set word count?

Argument and Reasoning

An ‘academic argument’ is a point of view that is presented with the express purpose of convincing you of its validity or truth. A reasoned (well-evidenced) argument is much more convincing than one that is based on your personal opinion.

Argument

When writing an argument, it may help to write as though the reader disagrees with you; your aim is to convince them that your point of view is a valid and rational one. You will need to provide evidence, and counter-evidence, in support of your ideas.

You cannot build a successful argument if you do not know what point of view you ultimately want to present; this is why essay planning is so important. Before you start writing, decide what your main argument will be. You can then plan a series of smaller arguments, to build up to your main point.

When planning your essay, divide it into headed sections, and list the main points you are going to make under each heading. This will help you to control how the essay will develop, ensure you remain ‘on point’ and help you to build toward that all-important final argument.

A well-constructed argument, that builds in strength as your essay progresses, provides your reader with a ‘golden thread’ to follow. If the golden thread has been threaded through the essay properly, the reader will not be surprised by your conclusion!

Reasoning

Sound reasoning is one of the most important elements in a good essay. Each idea explored, and every point made, should form part of a credible chain of evidence that leads step by step towards your final substantive claim.

Providing a ‘credible chain of evidence’ is what we mean by a well-reasoned argument. If points are made without any supporting evidence or rationale, the connection between each will be unclear and the flow of ideas will be illogical.

Example:

*The **4-hour wait** was introduced in the NHS Plan to **improve outcomes** for patients (DOH, 2000). However, most A&E departments are currently **failing to meet these targets** (NHS England, 2017) a situation which **poses a threat to patient safety** (NHS England, 2015). **Despite many strategies to address this**, it was recognised by the Keogh Review (NHS England, 2015), that **emergency care services remain fragmented and confusing**. **Further action is therefore required** as a matter of urgency to **ensure patient safety is not compromised**.*

In this example, the key point in each sentence is highlighted in bold to show how a reasoned argument is developed: 4-hour waits introduced to improve outcomes, targets not met, threat to patient safety, different strategies tried but unsuccessful and *further action required to protect patient safety*.

The final statement is the claim. The other points all lead towards the claim (or final argument). Each point is evidenced and so the argument is a reasoned one.

Generalisations

It is easy to get carried away when arguing a point which you passionately believe to be right but take care not to make sweeping statements or generalisations such as, people who are overweight eat too much or people who live alone get depressed.

If you make a claim that can be disputed, make sure you support it with evidence. Your overall aim is to show the reader that your ideas have been carefully considered in the context of what is already known about the topic.

Choice of words

Choose the words that are correct for the message you want to convey. If you are unsure which word to use, check in a dictionary for the precise meaning. If you are using a word which has several different meanings and/or spellings, look it up to check that you have used the correct form. If you find yourself using the same words repeatedly use a thesaurus to find words with the same or similar meaning.

Commonly Confused Words

A and an - 'a' is used before a consonant sound, e.g. 'a child', 'a policy'; 'an' is used before a vowel (the letters a, e, i, o, or u), e.g. 'an entrance', 'an older person'.

It is easy to understand why 'an' is put before a vowel: try saying 'a ambulance' aloud – it's not easy!

Accept and except – 'to accept' means 'to receive', e.g. 'he accepted the certificate'; 'except' means 'all but', e.g. 'everyone except Mia knew the answer'.

Affect and effect – 'affect' either refers to influence, e.g. 'The noise affected the whole group' or emotional response, e.g. 'he showed little affect'; 'effect' refers to the result or outcome, e.g. 'The analgesia had little effect'.

Cite, sight and site – to 'cite' means to quote or mention, e.g. 'citing references'; 'sight' refers to the ability to see, e.g. 'he had poor eye sight'; 'site' refers to a location, e.g. 'the building site'.

Than and then – 'than' is used when comparing, e.g. 'Arjun is quicker than Patrick'; 'then' refers to a point in time, e.g. 'it happened then'.

There and their – 'there' refers to place, e.g. 'over there'; 'their' shows ownership, e.g. 'their equipment'.

Transitional Link Words

Transitional link words can be used to link ideas or parts of a sentence together. Good use of transitional link words will improve the flow and fluency of your writing.

Example transitional words:

If you want to..	Try using...
Create contrast	although / but conversely / despite even so / even though however / in contrast nevertheless on the contrary still / whereas
Illustrate something	as follows / as shown for example for instance in particular in this case such as / that is
Show you are moving on to the next step	then / after that
Extend a point / Additional Information	as a consequence to be more precise furthermore in addition moreover similarly / as well as
Illustrate cause and effect	so / hence / due to accordingly since as a consequence owing to this
Show you are concluding	therefore /finally in conclusion to sum up in brief as a result

Proofreading

Proofreading means examining your text carefully to find and correct mistakes in grammar, style, and spelling.

Get the main aspects of your text right first. Don't make corrections at the sentence and word level if you still need to work on the focus, organisation, and development of the whole paper.

Use the feedback from previous pieces of work to help you to work out what to look for when proof reading. If your feedback says you have made frequent spelling mistakes, that your use of 'however' is incorrect, or that you misuse capital letters, then look for these errors specifically when proofreading.

Other Tips

Write as though your reader understands the theories that are considered to be common knowledge in your discipline but does not know the detail or specifics of your topic area.

Follow the assignment submission instructions carefully, e.g. make sure you have answered the essay question fully; submit your work well before the submission deadline; use the software you have been told to use such as Microsoft Word; and never, ever submit work that isn't completely your own.

As you write, keep checking back to the essay title to ensure that you are not losing focus on the purpose of the assignment.

Read and/or listen carefully to feedback on your work; it is there to help you to develop and improve your writing.

Use the correct referencing system, alternatives styles are not accepted however well presented!

Proofreading Tips

- ✓ Proofread from a hard copy printout as well as on screen; it helps you see the text in a different way.
- ✓ Read out loud. This is especially helpful for spotting run-on sentences, but you will also hear other problems that you may not see when reading to yourself.
- ✓ Set your work aside for a while between writing and proofreading. Taking a break from the text will help you to see mistakes more easily.
- ✓ Cover up the lines below the one you're reading using a blank sheet of paper. This prevents you from skipping ahead of possible mistakes.
- ✓ Use the search function to find mistakes you commonly make, e.g. search for 'its,' if you commonly confuse 'its' and 'it's'.
- ✓ Check separately for each kind of error, moving from the most to the least important.
- ✓ Read through your essay backwards, sentence by sentence to check for fragments. Read through forwards to check that subjects and verbs agree.
- ✓ End with a spelling check using a computerised spelling checker if necessary. Remember that a spelling checker won't catch mistakes with homonyms, e.g. 'they're', 'their', 'there' or typos such as 'he' for 'the'.

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Example 'The 4-hour wait...' with kind permission from Mandy Roberts, MSc student, University of Hertfordshire.

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