Some Thoughts, Guidelines, and Advice on Academic Writing //
 The Academic Support Centre, Lund University, 2015

Writing & Thinking

Writing is often considered a "general skill" and isn't always explicitly taught as part of a course curriculum, but in academia it is the primary medium for communicating with and responding to others in your field, which means it's pretty important. Mirroring this importance of writing as a professional academic, writing is the primary way you are graded as a student, which means…that it's pretty important. Not to mention, of course, that many jobs rank writing and communication skills highly in lists of desired employee qualifications, which just might be the most important reason we recommend that you plan to spend a lot of time practicing writing. At the end of the day, knowledge and ideas are kind of meaningless if you are unable to communicate them in an appropriate way to your intended audience.

That said, keep in mind that writing is not *only* a communication tool, but also a thinker's tool. Have you ever had a fantastic idea in your head that didn't seem as great on paper? Or maybe after pondering an issue for a while, you thought you had a clear argument, but realized when you started to write that some parts of it were more complicated than you thought? Psychologist Ronald Kellogg (2008, p. 2) explains that "thinking is so closely linked to writing, at least in mature adults, that the two are practically twins," which means that discrepancies and differences between ideas in our heads and ideas on paper are totally normal. Often the most arduous and in-depth thinking about a question or problem is done while we write about it, not before. This leads to **two very important tips**. One: use writing as a study tool during your courses. Summarize lectures, work through concepts that are difficult and question others' reasoning. Keep a reading journal and write down your thoughts about everything you read. Make connections between articles and question assumptions. Create study groups to discuss your written reflections. Two: never turn in your first draft, simply because the first draft usually does not represent the most thought-through version of your ideas and argument.

The following information is meant to make you aware of some of the aspects of academic writing, but does not cover all of them. If you are already aware of some or all of these elements, then consider how comfortable you are putting them into practice. Writing requires at least 10,000 hours of deliberate practice (just like other complex skills like playing an instrument) to master (Kellogg 2008, p. 2), and deliberate practice probably does not include quickly writing an essay the night before it's due. How many hours do you already have under your belt? Check out this partial list academic writing sub-skills to get you thinking about what you already do well and what you could still work on:

> **Reading**
> -identifying claims in others' texts and their strengths and weaknesses
> -deciphering the conversation others engage in (i.e., what motivates an author's
> argument?; what arguments is the author responding to?; is the author agreeing or
> disagreeing with another claim?)
> -assessing writing norms in your field

Language
-formulating ideas clearly, with precise language
-creating cohesive and coherent text at all levels: the whole text, sub-sections, paragraphs, and sentences
-using appropriate academic style and tone (according to your field)

Argument building
-using other sources to lead you to an argument of your own
-navigating what other people think in relation to what you think
-using reasons and evidence to support your claim

Tools to incorporate sources into your text
-paraphrasing
-quoting
-summarizing
-referencing

The skill that encompasses most others:
-understanding and anticipating your readers' needs and expectations of your text

This list could continue, but you get the idea: academic writing is a lot more than thinking hard about something and then putting words on a page. It's not even just about following "rules" like "never use personal pronouns" or "use passive voice to sound objective." In fact, we don't recommend that you follow that advice blindly. Academic writing, indeed any writing, is about making choices. If you choose to avoid personal pronouns, for example, then do so because you've thought about *why,* taking into account the norms in your field.

Plagiarism

Notice that many of the sub-skills have to do with dealing with other people's texts. Indeed, academic writing is a way to join a conversation about a topic, which requires that you engage with what other people say about that topic. There are appropriate and inappropriate ways to do this, and inappropriate source use that fails to make clear which thoughts are yours and which are not is plagiarism.

Lund University's plagiarism policy (2012) contains definitions for two kinds of plagiarism (click here to read the policy for yourself).

The first is a foundational definition: "Plagiarism is a lack of independence in the design and/or wording of academic work presented by a student compared to the level of independence required by the educational context."

The second definition takes intent to deceive into account: "Deceitful plagiarism is a lack of independence combined with an intent on the part of the student to present the work of others as his or her own."

All plagiarism, whether deceitful or not, must by law be reported to the University Board. The Board then decides if the student should be suspended for their actions. Many of you are aware of the most obvious plagiarism cases: paying for someone else to write a paper for you, downloading an

essay from the Internet, or copy-pasting passages from other sources into your own text. Other, less obvious cases can occur if you are careless with referencing or unaware of what constitutes independent thinking. This means that, for example, if you find it difficult to construct an argument for a paper on your own and instead use an argument from a source (or parts of arguments from several sources) without giving credit to these sources, then you could be charged with plagiarism. It also means that if you paraphrase a source too closely with or without a citation, you could be charged with plagiarism.

Note that LU's plagiarism definition specifically emphasizes "lack of independence." This means, then, that you must hone your independent and critical thinking skills during your studies and should prioritize time to practice your writing skills so that you can successfully communicate independent thinking through text.

For more reading on plagiarism, check out [Academic Writing in English at Lund University](#) (AWELU).

> **BOOK TIP**: *They Say/I Say: The Moves That Matter in Academic Writing* by Gerald Graff and Cathy Birkenstein (2010). If you can, buy this book. It's thin, unpretentious, and aims to "demystify the academic conversation." This means that it plainly explains how and why to use sources and construct an independent argument with templates for the "moves" it describes, as well as exercises for practicing. It also includes short chapters on contributing to classroom discussion (there will be a lot!) and tips for deciphering difficult academic texts.

Having an argument

Part of appropriately engaging with sources involves constructing your own argument. "Argument" in everyday life often means conflict, but in the academic world it more often means a well-supported idea that is convincingly presented in writing or a presentation. Almost every type of text written at a university has some type of argument, an idea or claim that you want to convince your readers is true.

In *The Craft of Research*, Booth et. al. (2008) define five elements of an argument: claims, reasons, evidence, counterargument, and warrants. In this introduction, we'll focus on the first three, which are absolutely essential elements of an argument, with brief explanations of the last two. Here's how Booth et. al. (2008) formulate the relationship between claims, reasons, and evidence.

CLAIM → *because of* → REASON(S) → *based on* → EVIDENCE

The main claim of a paper is the sentence or short section of the text that articulates an assertion that could be true or false (i.e., not a fact). That is, someone could disagree with you and write the opposite paper. If you're working with a problem or a question in your text, then your main claim will be the solution or the answer. In order to convince the reader that your solution or answer is the best one, you'll have to present various reasons that your claim is true (these reasons are also known as "sub-claims"), and then present evidence for those reasons. How many sub-claims you need and how much evidence depends on the topic and what you judge your readers' expectations to be.

Most readers find it easiest if the main claim of the paper comes at the end of the introduction. If the reader knows the main idea of the text first, then all the details that follow are easier to understand. Readers won't have to ask as often, "Why is this detail here?" or "What is all this leading up to?" What can make this concept difficult for some writers is the fact that when we write, we don't often fully realize our main claim until we've written the body of the text. So it feels more natural to start the paper with something like, "this paper explores the relationship between X and Y" (which is an intention, not a claim), and then to write what we've actually concluded about the relationship between X and Y at the end. The challenge, then, is to allow yourself to write drafts this way, and then leave time to revise your text, making the smart structural change to move your main claim to the introduction.

Take note that papers that follow the IMRaD format (Introduction – Methods – Results (and) Discussion) don't always state their main claim at the beginning. Instead, the formal presentation of the research question takes the claim's place at the beginning. Why is it acceptable to delay the main claim in this kind of paper and not others? Well, one reason this works is because IMRaD is such a well-established format that readers know exactly where to find specific information. Smart readers will often read the introduction then the conclusion to find the answer to the question, and THEN go back to read the rest of the text to see how the author arrived there.

Once you've established your main claim, you'll need to figure out how to support it. If you claim that the term "development" is problematic, for example, the next step is to answer "why?" In the drafting stage, you might keep a working statement of your main claim and reasons that you develop as your text develops:

The term "development" is problematic because (reason #1, reason #2, reasons #3…).

Even if this statement doesn't end up in your final text, it will help keep your writing and thinking focused through the process.

Reason #1 might be "there are many different and even conflicting definitions of the term." This would be the first sub-claim in the paper, and now we need some evidence to prove that it is true. In this case, the evidence would be explanations of various definitions and how they conflict. You'll want to make sure you clearly connect the sub-claim to the main claim, something that tells us why having lots of different definitions is problematic (this is a warrant, one of the elements of an argument: a general principle that shows why your reason is relevant to your claim. If it's not obvious how they are related, then you'll need to explicitly tell the readers why).

Evidence, then, you might have figured out, usually requires that you refer to outside sources. If you've collected your own data, then you'll use that as evidence for a claim, but if not (or in addition to), you might use secondary data, paraphrase or quote an authority on the subject, or explain examples of your claim in action.

Remember, no argument exists in a vacuum; you will need to explain the context of your argument in your introduction and at some point – either along the way or in a separate section—address real or potential counterarguments.

Effective argument-building is a skill that takes a long time to perfect and the process can become complicated. If you feel insecure about building academic arguments, we recommend that you focus

on the three basic elements—practice articulating your main claim at the beginning of your text and developing clear reasons with appropriate evidence to prove that claim— before moving on to counterarguments and warrants.

Significance

Readers don't always understand immediately how or why a paper's claim is important or something worth exploring. After they read your main claim, they might ask "so what?" or "what will I or the field gain if this claim is true?" This means, then, that in addition to stating your main claim at the beginning of your paper, it's also important to state its significance. For example, if you claim that the term "development" is problematic, imagine your reader asking "Is it even a bad thing that a term is problematic? What are the consequences of this, exactly?" Maybe you would then write something about how the discussions of the term itself sometimes overshadow practical implementation of development initiatives.

Professor and writing expert Joseph Williams (2007) helpfully characterizes significance in terms of understanding and doing—that is, conceptual significance and practical significance. If the whole point of your paper is to understand something better, then he proposes that you think about what your field will gain from this understanding. Often, your small contribution of understanding is a piece of a bigger puzzle, something more important that people in your field want to understand. Think of the relationship this way:

If we understand [your topic] better, then we will better understand/be closer to understanding this more important topic, _____.

Other times, your claim will have practical implications as well, meaning that if we better understand your topic, we (or some specific group of people) will have to take some action to solve a problem or improve a situation:

If we understand [your topic] better, then we will know what to do to change/fix/improve/solve this problem/situation:_____.

If you're not confident that the potential conceptual and/or practical benefits of exploring your topic are apparent to your intended audience, then you will need to state these benefits clearly. If the benefits are important to your readers, then they will be motivated to read on.

Grammar

Most people agree that things like having a significant central argument with relevant sub-claims and evidence are more important than perfect grammar. So please don't prioritize having correct grammar over those higher-order concerns. Keep in mind, though, that the point of having correct grammar is to be able to communicate easily with someone else. If you communicate your ideas successfully, readers might even forgive small imperfections. When these imperfections cloud or distract from your meaning, however, readers are less likely to forgive, and grammar becomes a higher-order concern. You want to be confident that you what mean to say is communicated as clearly as it can be, so that your readers can engage with your ideas, not infer their own. In addition to meaning-altering mistakes, readers often notice repeated grammatical mistakes, and this can detract from your credibility as a writer.

Keep track of your most common grammar mistakes and practice tackling one or two at a time on each assignment. For example, if you know you have trouble with subject-verb disagreement and misplaced commas, make it a goal for one assignment to eliminate those mistakes (instead of trying to eliminate ALL types of mistakes from one assignment).

The grammar section of the quiz has questions based on common mistakes. Many of the questions contain links to further explanation and practice for that specific type of error.

Language

Keep in mind that grammar isn't the only language-related issue in writing. Writers make many other choices all the time regarding (among other things) tone, specific word choice, effective signposting, and creating flow or cohesion in a text. The following is a bit of information about each of these things.

Some students think that an academic or more formal **tone** requires using big words and long sentences to "sound smart." The problem with this technique, though, is that the point of writing in academia isn't to sound smart, but to develop a good idea that somehow contributes to or advances thinking in your field. You want, then, to clearly and objectively communicate this good idea, not muddle it in convoluted sentence constructions and big words you found in a thesaurus. It can actually be more difficult to say something simply; in order to do this successfully, you have to fully understand the idea yourself. Sometimes big words for the sake of their "bigness" compensate for the writer's own lack of understanding.

This problem of overcomplicating things isn't only a student problem, though. You'll probably read some texts during your master's program written by professionals that use unnecessarily complicated language. When you confront these poorly written texts, ask yourself if the complications are somehow justified, and if not, how the text could be simplified. This is also a good way to test whether or not you've understood something you've read: summarize it in simplified language.

> **Unnecessarily complicated sentence:**
> *Recognition of the fact that systems [of grammar] differ from one language to another can serve as the basis for serious consideration of the problems confronting translators of the great works of world literature originally written in a language other than English.*
>
> **Simplified version:**
> *When we recognize that languages have different grammars, we can consider the problems of those who translate great works of literature into English.*
>
> From *Style: Lessons in Clarity and Grace* (Williams, J), p. 7

Word choice, then, is about more than arbitrarily exchanging some words for others. In academic texts, word choice is often about *conciseness* and *precision*. The best words are those that communicate what you want to say most directly and with the appropriate nuances. Good writers often replace a vague word with a more informative one. Some common vague words to avoid include "good," "bad," and "interesting." These can mean lots of different things, so ask yourself in what way is something good, bad, or interesting, and find a more informative word to express that.

For example, is something "effective" or "well-designed" instead of just "good?" "Underdeveloped" or "uninformed" instead of "bad?"

When possible, good writers often replace several words with one, more exact word, which helps to avoid wordiness. For example, "as a means to" is just "to;" "with the exception of" is just "except;" "there is evidence that suggests that" becomes "evidence suggests that;" and "due to the fact that" is replaced with a simple "because."

They also delete redundant words. For example: "join" instead of "join together" because it's impossible to "join apart" or "continue" instead of "continue on," because continue already means to go on. Imprecise adjectives and adverbs also have to go, like the "very" in "our approach to the problem was very effective," because "very" doesn't communicate anything specific or quantifiable about the effectiveness of the approach. Instead, the writer might revise this sentence to something like, "With this approach, we effectively determined the major causes of the problem," which tells the reader in which way the approach was effective.

For many more examples of how to create more concise and precise writing, visit this page from Purdue's Online Writing Lab.

Signposting is specific language that helps your readers understand and follow the structure of your text. Literally, a signpost is a sign on a road that points out the path to a specific destination, so you understand where this tool gets its name.

Signposts can work on different levels of a text: the whole, a section, a paragraph, a sentence. Signposts for the whole text usually come at the end of the introduction and tell readers how the remaining text is organized and what they will find in each section. On her academic writing blog, Rachael Cayley (2011) explains that if the text is really short, you might not need this signpost, and likewise, there's no need to describe a self-evident structure (like an IMRaD paper with this in the introduction: "The second chapter explains the methods, followed by the results, a discussion, and finally a conclusion"). It's possible to avoid generic forecasts, though, and signpost while giving insight into the paper's topic. Cayley offers this template as an example: "In the first section, I will discuss X" can be replaced with something that shows the relationship between the paper's concepts—"Given the centrality of X to any treatment of Y, this paper will begin by demonstrating the internal complexity of X within the context of Z." Check out Cayley's post on "The Evolution of Signposting" to see how you can use a generic forecast to help yourself write a text and gradually revise it to help a reader understand the relationships between its parts.

Besides a signpost for the whole, readers often need signposts at the beginning and end of sections (if it's a long paper) that are similar to introduction signposts, but on a smaller scale, and sometimes readers need signposts on the paragraph and sentence level. Some people call these "linking words and phrases" or "transitions." It doesn't really matter what you call them, as long as you understand their function: to help the reader get from one idea to the next one. To do this, you have to identify how the ideas are related. Is one an example of the other? A contrast? Background information? An implication? A result? A cause? See this list of commonly used signposting words and the relationship they indicate (from Open University) to add to your writer's toolkit.

A word of caution: it's not appropriate to rely *only* on these words to connect your paragraphs and sentences. A common mistake we see is that students get stuck with two or three words (often "furthermore," "moreover," and "therefore"), overuse them to show some kind of connection, and sometimes incorrectly use them to create a connection that isn't otherwise in the text.

The good news is that there are other, more sophisticated ways to **create flow in a text** that require a flow of information. The most well-connected sentences often display a pattern of old-to-new information. In a sentence, "old information" is given early, connecting to the last piece of information given in the previous sentence, while "new information" is placed in the latter half of the sentence. Here's an example (from *Academic Writing for Graduate Students*, Swales, J.M. & Feak, C.B.):

> Research has shown that <u>caffeine does indeed reduce sleepiness</u> and can lead to better academic performance since students can spend more time studying. <u>Despite its effectiveness in counteracting sleepiness</u>, caffeine can have a negative impact on subsequent sleep, which for many students may already be compromised.

The second underlined phrase is a reference to "old" information from the previous sentence about caffeine reducing sleepiness. Notice that it uses different words to refer to the same information, and includes "despite" at the beginning, which notifies the reader immediately that a contrast is being introduced.

Another way to make reference to previous information is to use "this/these + a noun/summary phrase" at the beginning of a sentence. For example (from *Academic Writing for Graduate Students*, Swales, J.M. & Feak, C.B.):

> In recent years, the number of students applying to PhD programs has increased steadily, while the number of places available has remained fairly constant. <u>This situation</u> has resulted in intense competition in admission.

"This situation" refers to the idea in the previous sentence and allows the next sentence to move on to new information about that idea.

Visit this page from the University of New South Wales for a couple more examples of the old-new information flow, and click on the bottom of the practice putting the concept into practice.

Before you go

Please keep in mind that this document has been a mere introduction to academic writing, and that there are many other aspects we could have addressed. The topics that were included are based on common concerns and unawareness that students who visit the Academic Support Centre often have. As the students change, so will this document.

As the title of this document suggests, we don't like to think in terms of "rules," but "guidelines." The one hard and fast rule addressed here is in the plagiarism section, that you must appropriately cite

anyone and everyone you get ideas from. Other than that, we can think of an exception to most things here.

Some of you might feel overwhelmed after reading this document, especially if you come from an academic culture that doesn't prioritize writing. Take comfort in knowing that academic writing was new for everyone at some point; no one is born an academic writer. To be honest, writing well is just plain hard, but it's important, and we want to encourage you to take it seriously, not just because we like to read great essays (though we do!), but because we are positive it will benefit you later in life. We highly encourage you to take advantage of this low-stakes summer assignment because this is a rare opportunity to get feedback on a text that you're not graded on, which means that it can't hurt, only help.

Print this document and keep it with you when you read and write – add your own notes and personal tricks so that it becomes a guide specific to you. If anything here was new to you, or you realize that you will need extra practice with something, please be sure to follow the links provided and check out the Academic Support Centre's resource list. Of course, you are welcome to make an appointment at the Academic Support Centre anytime during your studies to discuss writing in general or a specific text you're working on.

To make an appointment, or if you have any questions or suggestions for this document, please contact Lund University's Academic Support Centre at english.support@stu.lu.se.

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