

Academic Writing Guideline for Writing in English



AVOK - Centre for Academic Writing and Communication
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Head of AVOK

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Section I: Academic Writing

What is academic writing?

In order to determine what academic writing is, it is necessary to place it within the context for which it is used. In our case, the context of academic writing is the University of Tartu, Estonia. Knowing the context, and seeking meaningful answers to this question has confronted us with a number of dilemmas which need to be clarified for you to understand why the content of this booklet is the way it is.

The biggest challenge we have faced is translating what we know about academic writing into Estonian. It seems not much has been written about academic writing from a purely Estonian writing tradition. More specifically, investigating what academic writing traditions are applied in Estonian higher education and therefore what it means to write academically seems to be lacking. As a result, finding the right words describing the right aspects has been and still is a major challenge. You also have to understand that this text is written in English and translated into Estonian, which means that many of the concepts and ideas presented come from a more Anglo-Saxon tradition. In other words, much more is known, or presented about academic writing in English, from the perspectives of publishers who mainly deal with academic writing concepts and problems in English speaking countries such as the United States, Canada, Australia, and the United Kingdom. The United Kingdom is placed somewhat outside as academic writing there is viewed from a slightly different perspective. All the other three seem to share a similar academic system which supports and teaches academic writing fairly similarly.

Placing academic writing in the context of Europe, and more specifically of Estonia, means that both national and institutional perspectives on academic writing need to be taken into consideration. Determining what type of academic writing is being

done at the University also needs to be understood before concrete advice can be offered about academic writing and learning to write academically.

In 2009 we (AVOK) conducted a University of Tartu wide survey which aimed to investigate what type of writing is being given to students (teachers' perspectives), how writing is perceived (teachers' and students' perspectives), the perspective of the quality of the writing (teachers' and students' perspective), and whether students and teachers think support is needed to teach and develop academic writing, and if so, who is responsible. The result of the survey has revealed a common misconception about academic writing, which is that most of the students who enter university know how to write academically and that writing is something you do, rather than learn. This common misconception is often made as academic writing heavily relies on the application of specific language, and therefore, if you have problems writing, it must be because you lack the language skills; thus, fix your language.

The survey also revealed a common understanding about academic writing. There is a clear difference between the type and frequency of writing tasks students are engaged in at the start of their academic endeavour and at the end (final year BA, MA, or PhD), and in which faculties, departments, and study areas these differences are strongly represented or not represented at all (AVOK survey data, 2009). Additionally, teachers' perspectives on their students' writing is often less positive than students' perspectives on their own writing: as teachers go through reading a lot of student texts, it's the bad ones that leave a lasting impression, and students are almost never able to compare their writing with the writing of their peers. Often, the only reflection students have about their writing is graded representation at the end, rather than a comment at the beginning. And finally, academic writing is different across the disciplinary board. Writing in the natural sciences is different from writing in the humanities. Writing in history is different from writing in law, or business studies, etc.

Both the shared conceptions as well as the misconceptions have become the agents driving the content of this booklet. As a result, the shared conceptions are represented by the different versions of this booklet (the four major represented research areas at the University of Tartu: *Humaniora* (humanities), *Medicina* (Medical sciences), *Realia et Naturalia* (real and natural sciences), and *Socialia* (social sciences) and the English version. We also understand that even within these four major disciplines there are a lot of differences in academic writing requirements, e.g. within *Socialia* (Economics, Psychology, and Law). Therefore, we have included links and references to online sources offered by these departments in each respective booklet, as well as including the opinions of academic members within different departments about writing, writing requirements, and general perceptions of writing within their discipline.

As most of the writing in these four divisions is done in Estonian, specifically at the

beginning stages, we aim to support this target group, as they also would benefit the most from an informative booklet such as this. The English version mainly caters for the international students writing at one of the international programmes. However, all students who need to write in English will find useful information from this booklet. The common misconceptions about academic writing are addressed by introducing concepts of how writing is learned, techniques which can be applied and used to reflect on the writing, and, more specifically, to show how academic writing is constructed to become writing.

So, coming back to the original question: what is academic writing, our aim is for you to be able to answer this question after reading this booklet. What we can say is that the answer greatly depends on many factors; at what stage of your academic writing career are you asking this, in which discipline, for what purpose and for whom are you writing? If you're a PhD student, for example, academic writing for you is mainly represented by journal articles. If you're a bachelor's student in medical sciences, academic writing might mainly consist of lab reports. And, if you are a student in natural sciences, some of the academic writing you do - mainly written exam questions - is only to be assessed by your class instructor. From this perspective, you can already get an idea what we are getting at. Within most academic writing you may find yourself engaged in, there are a number of components which will apply in all situations, and which will help you to learn how to become a more skilled academic writer.

Writing academically

Academic writing, and writing in general, is a skill, and skills are generally learned through practice, practice, and more practice. Some people like writing, and as a result, practice their writing whenever they write. For example, you may enjoy writing entries in a personal diary, you might keep a blog on the web, post lots of comments on Facebook, or even Tweet regularly. Some people enjoy writing poetry and creative stories, either as a hobby, or with the intention to publish.

You may identify yourself as one of those persons who enjoys writing, as exemplified above, or you may be amongst the majority of students who actually do not like writing, at all, or has lost the passion to write. Schools and university, as educational institutions, may have been the cause of this demise; these institutions have taken the 'joy' out of writing as the application of writing within this setting often changes its meaning and purpose. Within an educational context, writing is mainly used as a means to assess. However, as we know in academia, the application of writing is an extremely powerful tool for learning (which we'll thoroughly discuss in the next part).

Although the concept of writing to learn may not be immediately apparent, the use of writing as a form of assessment is much more obvious. Students, specifically at university, are constantly confronted with deadlines for the writing assignments which are part of a course's requirements. According to the survey, the research area of Humanities offers students the widest variety of writing assignments, as well as the most frequently, in comparison to the other three research areas (Medical Sciences, Real and Natural Sciences, Social Sciences). Quite often, the deadline for an essay, for example, is set at the end of the semester, and in some cases can count to a large part of the final grade as the essay will measure how much the students have learned from the course content. From a writing perspective, this is what is referred to as product oriented writing.

Product oriented writing

Product oriented writing is exactly what it says it is: a product that needs to be handed in at a specific date for assessment. The product is likely to be assessed according to specific criteria set by the course instructor. From the perspective of a learner, it means having to assume that you know what these criteria are and hoping that the writing you produce matches these assumptions. Product oriented writing can often be recognised by the following: completing writing tasks as quickly and as painlessly as possible for a maximum score; leaving the writing assignment to the last minute; lack of time for revision and reviewing before handing in the text; and little or no feedback on the final assessed product. Thus, product oriented writing leaves a student with the impression that the grade received on the product is a reflection of what the student has learned or knows about the subject and not so much about whether the written task was dealt with correctly, or incorrectly (the final grade might be a result of poor writing, rather than a lack of subject knowledge). So when it comes to learning how to write, being aware of writing as a process is essential, as it will allow you to exercise much more control over the learning of content specific knowledge through the application of specific writing conventions, as well as to be more engaged in an academic dialogue with your content specific audience, whether they be the instructor who is going to assess your paper, or your peers.

Process oriented writing

In comparison to product writing, process writing is basically completing many sub-products, at different stages, for the same final product. In other words, writing has many different stages, and every stage is represented by different processes, all of

which contribute to a developed written product. A final written product, as we see published, has undergone many different processes, starting from a stage which is defined as a pre-writing stage, followed by a writing stage, and completed with a post-writing stage. What we know from writing research is that the writing stage is often the least time consuming stage. We also know that the pre-writing stage is where many writers get in trouble, and not enough time is spent on the post-writing stage. We will discuss these different stages in more detail below, and offer, for every single stage, guidelines and suggestions how to optimally make use of these stages to develop yourself to become a more skilled academic writer.

Learn to write. Write to learn.

Generally, as we stated above, it cannot be assumed, or taken as a fact, that students entering university (or exiting, for that matter), will know how to write academically. First of all, generally speaking, the majority of students who enter university come from a secondary school system that has not required them to write academically, if it had required them to write anything at all that resembles the writing students are asked to do at university. Thus, upon entering university students have had little or no practice of academic writing. Secondly, beginning university students have little, or no experience with reading academic text which is representative of the text they are asked to write. Therefore, at the beginning stages of university academic writing, students should be offered a lot of practice to develop both their academic writing skills, as well as their academic reading and thinking skills. But, what if the curriculum students follow does not contain a great deal of opportunities to practice writing academically? And what if their curriculum does not require them to write a thesis at the end of their BA studies? What if it does? Well, if students are not asked to write a thesis, and continue on to study at a master's level, these students will enter their studies with little or no practice writing academically. If they are asked to write a thesis at the end of their BA studies, as a result of little practice, students often struggle and are depending heavily on the supervisor's ability to help them to deliver a product which meets the requirement set by the committee assessing the thesis.

The more students are offered to do some writing, the wider the variety of writing tasks, and the more they will be able to reflect on their text, either through receiving teacher feedback, but also peer feedback, etc. the more skilled students become at writing academically.

We also suggest that writing and learning to write is not just building a necessary academic skill, but it also helps students to engage with subject matter for the purpose of learning the subject matter. When instructors assign writing assignments, they often do so as a means to assess learning, as we established earlier. These

writing assignments are, therefore, formulated in such a way so that the assessor of the assignment is going to be able to assess the learning of the content he or she set out to teach. In other words, understanding the writing assignment is the key to getting a good grade.

Thus, going back to the beginning of this booklet, what academic writing, within this context, strongly depends what your assignment is asking you to do.

The academic writing process

At this point we focus our attention to describing and applying the process of academic writing, and offering you a systematic approach to understanding what it means to write academic text, how to write academic text, and how to become better at writing academic text in a step by step approach, starting with understanding your assignment and the prewriting phase, followed by the writing phase, and ending with the post-writing phase.

Understanding your assignment

As indicated earlier, understanding your assignment is a key, if not the key component of any academic writing assignment. Although understanding your assignment is part of the prewriting stage of the writing process, we feel it is necessary to dedicate a separate section to this topic. In our experience, and according to the experience of many other centres for academic writing, students often do not understand what the assignment is actually asking from them. As a result, students make assumptions about the task and complete the writing task based on their own preconceived ideas about what 'academic' writing is and how it should be done. As a result, students might be writing a descriptive text, when a more argumentative text is required, or students might write from personal experience, when the task asks students to write from credible sources. Remember, academic writing can be many things, depending on what you are asked to do.

Misunderstanding this part of the writing process will lead to a lower grade and will quite often damage a student's confidence about their own skill in writing. Our main advice is, therefore, if you are not sure if you understood the assignment correctly, check with your instructor, double check with your instructor, and check again with your instructor (no shame in making sure), or check with your peers.

In addition, the following points will also help you along to analyse the assignment and draw up a plan for your text.

1. Read the assignment thoroughly at the time when you receive it.

The assignment sheet you received should contain the most important information, such as the length of the task, the deadline of the task, the nature of the task, the audience, and perhaps additional information which will guide you and teach you how to write the text.

Make sure you read the assignment instructions containing the question twice. When you are reading the assignment sheet for the second time, highlight words which are unclear, words which you think are **keywords** of the assignment and ask yourself how this text relates to the knowledge you have been learning in class; what is the **goal** (*what are you being asked to do*)?

Keywords

These mainly prescribe the content of your text. What is the topic? Are there any restrictions? You'll need all of them reflected in your text, and understanding these will help you to choose your reading and information needed to develop your text.

- Being able to identify keywords ensures you understand the assignment clearly
- Specifically in lengthy assignment instructions, it is important to distinguish which words reflect the content of your written text as opposed to formal instructions.

Example 1: The study of the equal rights movement in Estonia, over the last 5 years, has not changed or improved the gender pay gap. Discuss.

The underlined words are key components which need to be included in your answers.

Goal

The goal of the assignment is usually indicated on the assignment sheet, either as a single directive (usually an active verb) which is telling you to do something with the keywords specified above, or with multiple directives (*prove and discuss*). Example 1, above, tells you to *discuss* the problem. What does it mean, to discuss? Is listing possible answers, or facts a discussion? Or will you need to include additional resources and references in order to create a discussion?

In general, writing assignments will ask you the following:

1. Demonstrate what you know about a subject.
2. Demonstrate how certain things are related or connected.
3. Support and defend your ideas about a subject.

Going through your assignment, look for the following action verbs. Your assignment will have at least one of these active verbs, but quite often it will contain a combination of these words. In general we can state that these action verbs are related to assessing your thought as well as your knowledge and your ability to use these.

1. Demonstrate what you know

e.g. give reasons for a situation or attitude and provide examples.	explain
e.g. list the most important aspects or points about the topic or subject.	summarise
e.g. give the meaning of concepts or terms.	define
e.g. give concrete examples. These can be in the form of tables, figures, diagrams, etc.	illustrate

2. Demonstrate connection or relation

e.g. highlight how two or more things are similar	compare
e.g. highlight how two or more things are different	contrast
Emphasise connections and associations.	relate

3. Support and defend ideas

give reasons or evidence for something you believe.	support
summarise your opinion or ideas about a topic and measure it against something.	assess
state your opinion about a topic (positive, negative, or both) and give examples and reasons.	evaluate
Identify and describe the parts of a topic, and explain how they relate to each other or how they work together.	analyse
defend an opinion or an idea with evidence.	argue
determine how individual parts create or relate to the whole, how it could work, what it might mean, or why it is important.	synthesise

One useful source to investigate if you want to know what you are asked to do is *Bloom's Taxonomy of learning objectives*.

(see our reference list at the end, or drop by AVOK for additional support and help with understanding the assignment)

Prewriting

What we know from writing research is that prewriting is a crucial element in the whole writing process and one which is often not exploited, or used by novice or inexperienced writers. As a result, students who ignore, or skip the prewriting phase hand in papers which lack structure or a solid foundation.

The prewriting phase of the writing process is everything you do to prepare yourself for the writing itself. This may include some or all of the following:

- Make a list of keywords and concepts
- Make a list of ideas on your topic/assignment
- Read and take notes on your topic
- Make clusters, mindmaps, visual schemas of your topic showing relations and connections.
- Raise questions about your topic

- Discuss your ideas with others (classmates, friends, writing consultants, etc.)
- Make an outline of your text
- Relate what you now know back to what the assignment asks for

Remember to constantly keep in mind who you are writing for, who your audience is and to adjust your text accordingly. It's your task to convince your audience and make sure they understand you (not the other way around).

The idea of prewriting helps to:

- Narrow your topic
- Determine how much you know about a topic and how much you will need to research the topic.
- Find a clear direction (redline) for your text
- Get over writer's block

Writer's block (before the writing starts)

If you are one of those writers who has problems with starting, there are a couple of techniques which may help you overcome this problem, and these are often included in the prewriting phase.

Freewriting or Brainstorming

Freewriting can help you discover ideas or find the right words to explore and develop existing ideas. Take your topic and give yourself a set period of time (between 1 to 6 minutes). During that time you write down non-stop everything that comes to mind about that topic. Once you complete this stage, reread what you wrote and pick up on an idea you like or wish to further explore in a new freewriting session. Repeat the process 2 to 5 times.

Writer's block can actually occur throughout the writing process, and freewriting and brainstorming have been known to work wherever you are in the process.

(for additional tips and techniques how to overcome writer's block, make an appointment with one of AVOK's writing consultants)

Writing

The writing phase of the writing process does not mean that this is where you will write your final product. On the contrary, the writing phase of the writing process is where you start putting text on paper. At this stage it is not referred to as the text but as the **draft** version of your final product.

The writing stage itself is also considered to be at the late stage of your product development as it is assumed that you have adequate information and understanding, are near or at the end of gathering research, and have completed the prewriting stage.

At this point, it is also important that you think about the best “writing” situation that applies to you. For example:

- The place where you write (library, home, cafe, etc.).
- The amount of time you need for writing and have for writing.
- Clearing distractions (such as social media; Facebook, Twitter, the Internet, e-mail etc.).

The writing stage mainly includes the following: *planning*, *drafting* and *developing*.

Planning

In the prewriting phase, you should have made an outline of your text, also referred to as the initial plan. Planning at the stage of writing means that you start to arrange your ideas and materials in your outline in a sensible order that will clarify the points you want to make. At this stage, you should also plan what your *thesis*, or main point is going to look like or be, and how it is going to reflect the rest of the text.

You can start planning how many paragraphs your text might need, how much space your introduction and conclusion need, as well as aspects related to your sources and references.

Drafting

This stage of writing is the actual phase of writing. At this stage, you’re developing your content into comprehensible paragraphs.

Remember that at this stage, everything you write is tentative and eligible for deletion or can be moved and/or altered. As the word drafting suggests, nothing is fixed, and nothing should be fixed. Allow yourself time to go through many stages

of developing your drafts. Remember also that at this stage it is not important that you focus too much on language, punctuation, or clarity of sentences. You'll have plenty of opportunities to focus on these when you enter the final stage of the writing process (post-writing).

As you draft, let yourself be guided by your prewriting phase. The research, the outline, the notes you have made should all guide you to develop a more or less coherent piece of text. Quite often, as a result of writing, you'll further develop specific ideas you had, or you might change your initial outline, or change your approach to the assignment. Do not be discouraged as making changes to initial plans and ideas is quite normal when you are drafting. It generally means that you are developing your idea. The final stage of the writing process will clear up any inconsistencies you might have encountered when drafting.

The most important writing elements you want to pay attention to during the drafting phase are:

- *Paragraphs*

When you construct your paragraphs, keep in mind that each paragraph should have a clearly distinct concept or idea. Every important point you wish to make can be incorporated into one well developed paragraph. Very long paragraphs usually mean that you have more than one idea and it is always a good indication that it needs revising. Knowing what your paragraphs do and what they say is an important indication whether the information you present fits the paragraph or would be better placed somewhere else. In other words, do not let a single paragraph say or do too much.

- *Your arguments*

It will help if you construct a sound argument that you can adapt when you are writing your paragraphs. Writing from a clear standpoint, idea, argument, helps you to stay focused.

- *Signposts*

When you are connecting your ideas, thoughts, and arguments, make sure you include clear signposts (words such as: next, following, because, as a result, however, finally, etc.) so your reader can easily follow your thoughts in the text. Signposts are particularly helpful when moving from one paragraph to the next.

- *Conclusion*

Your conclusion must come out as a result of the reasoning and arguments you have used as well as the evidence that support it. In other words, by now it must be quite clear what your conclusion is going to be.

You can always double check by looking back at your text and the main points you present. Finalise any point you wish to make, any position you are taking, etc. Remember, your conclusion is not absolute but a result of your argument.

- *Introduction*

We suggest to end the drafting with writing the introduction. As mentioned earlier, quite often we develop our ideas when writing, and therefore, our introduction is as tentative as the ideas we develop, or the conclusions we draw.

The introduction should be a reflection of the complete text. It's also the part where you need to capture your audience. If your audience is the instructor of the course, make sure the introduction reflects the assignment. Your introduction will contain the main thesis of your text and serve as a map for your readers.

(for additional tips and techniques how to construct arguments, thesis statements, paragraphs, introductions and conclusions make an appointment with one of AVOK's writing consultants)

Post-writing

Post-writing is often referred to as the final stage of the writing process, but, actually, the writing process only stops when your time is up and you have to hand over your text for a final assessment. The stage where your text has at last become a product.

The following are all part of the post-writing stage:

1. Reviewing and revising drafts
2. Editing
3. Proofreading

Reviewing and revising drafts

At this point you should get the sense that the writing process is very cyclical and that drafting is a recurring feature throughout the writing process. In this context, drafting is included in the post-writing phase, specifically in combination with re-

viewing and revising. The main reason is because there are a lot of strategies you can use to develop your text and your writing skills. The best way to do this is to do it with existing drafts of your text. The idea being, you are going to review and revise your text to improve the quality of your text and to improve the quality of your self-diagnostic skills, and eventually your writing skills.

Reviewing and revising

Once you have created ownership of your own writing, it becomes very difficult to review your own text for any set of criteria. The problem is that quite often we are not able to critically evaluate our text, or add or delete information throughout the text. Think about how many times you have deleted a complete paragraph in your text, or changed the introduction of your text completely. Sometimes it can be quite painful to delete a paragraph that has taken you 3 hours to write. What you need is help, and help from a fresh pair of eyes and a less committed mind. Therefore, we suggest that you find a way to get your text reviewed by others. The problem with this is that you need to be quite certain that the people who are going to review your text know what they are looking for and are sensitive to your cause. If not, reviewing may become a painstaking process, and do more harm than good. However, on the upside, if you receive constructive reviews on your text, by somebody who is sensitive to your cause, you and your text will likely benefit from this. Below we provide some suggestions how to organise reviews of your text by other people.

1. If you want to receive professional reviews of your text, you can drop by or make an appointment with a writing consultant at the centre for academic writing and communication (AVOK). These writing consultants are trained at reviewing texts and trained to provide constructive feedback on how to improve your text. In addition, quite often writing consultants are aware of the different genres, and disciplines, as well as languages and can, therefore, be helpful in more than one way.
2. Establishing writing groups is one way of getting multiple reviews on your text. The advantage of writing groups is that everybody who participates in the group is both being reviewed and offering reviews. Writing groups will often work best if the writers are writing in the same discipline.
3. Friends, family and relatives do not always make for good reviewers because they tend to be more positive and encouraging when perhaps more critical comments are required.

When you are asking others to review your text, it is always best if you provide the reviewer with some guidelines or questions. In this case, the review will be focused on that aspect you want them to focus on. If you do not do this, quite often the review will focus on language specific issues when you would actually prefer to receive comments on the clarity of your argument or the logic of structure.

Once you have received reviews on your draft, you'll have to go back to that draft and decide which of the aspects of the reviews you received you wish to revise and improve. You still have ownership of the text and you're therefore in charge of deciding which comments you received need immediate attention. If you receive a lot of comments, it's often wise to make a few changes and get another review of your new draft, etc.

Some texts might need to go through a single review process, whereas others might need three or four iterations. That's why it is important to allocate a good amount of time to the post-writing stage of the writing process.

Editing and proofreading

Once you are content with the final draft of your text, it's time to complete the final writing process and do some final editing and proofreading. Although editing and proofreading can be considered revising, revising is usually done on a much larger section of a text, whereas editing and proofreading is making changes at a sentence or word level.

When you think about editing, think about the following:

- Verb usage and tense
- Subject/verb agreement
- Adjectives and adverb usage
- etc.

Once this is done, leave your text as it is and return to it after a day or two/three and proofread the text one last time. Highlight/change anything that jumps out. By this time you are reading your text not for content but purely on the basis of it being text that needs to be made readable for the readers, without interruptions.

(Our writing consultants are available to help you review your text, organise writing groups, and support your revision process. In addition, some of our writing consultants can help you if English or Estonian is not your native language and you need help with editing)

Plagiarism - writing from sources

As plagiarism is a serious issue, our approach to dealing with this issue is to advocate good writing practice, which often eliminates problems associated with plagiarism.

Plagiarism most frequently occurs when students procrastinate, write at the last moment, do not spend enough time revising their text, do not plan their arguments or their sources.

Writing is time consuming, writing takes a lot of practice, and writing is about creating a dialogue between yourself, your sources, and your audience. It is, therefore, very important to learn how to write from sources. This guide offers the following suggestions:

- Allow plenty of time for your text to grow throughout the process (prewriting, writing, post-writing stages)
- In the prewriting phase, make sure you get a system in place to organise your literature, your notes. Mark everything you want to use, where did you get it, what page, author etc.
- Have a separate notebook or file in your computer to write down quotations, interesting points, opposing ideas, etc.
- When drafting, write as you would write. Do not copy and paste any sentences from the book, no matter how well they are written. You'll have plenty of time to rephrase your own ideas and thoughts, and refer them to the original source.
- When drafting, include any reference right away in your text. Know how to make references correctly (learn the system which is applicable for your text).
- Do not rely on other people to write the text for you.
- Always spend enough time on the revision and reviewing process. Drafting and reviewing is a powerful tool against plagiarism.
- Visit the centre for academic writing and communication (AVOK) for free assistance throughout the process, about any topic in the process.

The booklet's online version and homepage also include links to what specific departments have to say about plagiarism and the writing instructions they provide.

Useful sources

Google for the following sources:

term	description
the academic phrasebank	A general resource for academic writers. It aims to provide some of the phraseological 'nuts and bolts' of writing
academic word list	Using English for Academic Purposes: Information and Advice for Students in Higher Education.
advice on academic writing	University of Toronto guide
assessing the writing task	Bloom's Taxonomy of learning outcomes

Books:

- Academic Writing for Graduate Students, 3rd Edition: Essential Tasks and Skills (Michigan Series in English for Academic & Professional Purposes) **John M. Swales, Christine Feak**
- Writing Academic English, Fourth Edition (The Longman Academic Writing Series, Level 4) **Alice Oshima, Ann Hogue**
- Academic Writing: A Handbook for International Students **Stephen Bailey**
- They Say/I Say: The Moves That Matter in Academic Writing **Gerald Graff, Cathy Birkenstein**

<http://www.fl.ut.ee/en/guidelines>. The procedure and guidelines governing teaching and studying at the Faculty of Philosophy.

So, what is academic writing?

Based on all this, we can make some generalizations about academic writing. These generalizations can be applied to all writing assignments you engage in at university. As we have stated on multiple occasions, understanding the assignment is crucial and should, therefore, be the most important driving force behind any academic writing assignment.

Academic writing

- Academic writing differs from non-academic writing because academic writing engages in theories and causes. The writing itself will likely explore alternative views and explanations of these events.
- Academic writing has its own set of rules and practices which are often set by the institution where you study, or the instructor who invites you to write. It's important that you familiarise yourself with these rules and practices.
- Academic writing is organised, ordered and structured. The organisation, order and structure of the presented ideas are important as the text is going to be read by an audience who expects to be guided through your text and absolutely does not like reading in-between the lines.
- Academic writing is driven by references to outside sources. Often, the opinion of the author is secondary to those offered by external references and citations. In addition, these references need to support the ideas of the author.
- Academic writing follows a specific writing style reflected in the use of an academic language register. The language of academic writing is about clarity and not about sophistication.

As academic writing differs per academic research areas, we have asked specific people within specific disciplines to voice their opinion about academic writing and what they think are important aspects about writing in your discipline.

Section II - Academic Writing in International Programmes

Jyrki Heinämäki, UT Professor of Medical Technology.

1. What are the general criteria of good writing in your discipline?

Good writing takes into account the focus group and the purpose of presentation. The message of the writer needs to be clear, understandable, mainly flawless, logically progressing and in case of research articles, scientifically justified

2. How well prepared for writing do you think your students are when entering their bachelor's studies?

Today, the entering students have much better skills in communicating in English compared to e.g. those who entered their studies 10-20 years ago. Naturally, there are differences among the students, but in general we could say that their knowledge of English is at a quite satisfactory level. However, it seems that today most of the students have better oral presentation skills than writing skills in English. In the future, even more elective subject-related lecture courses and textbooks (in English) could be integrated in the curriculum at early-stage studies.

3. What type of writing do the students in your disciplines have to do?

The master's students who participate in some advanced-level elective lecture courses given in English are expected to answer the questions of the final exam either in the Estonian or English language. The questions in the final exam are mainly essay-type questions. The course participants are also asked to write a short summary of a scientific article published in the relevant topic area of the course and present it in English. The PhD students learn and practice scientific writing, i.e. conference abstracts, posters, research reports and scientific articles.

4. One of the most common writing assignments at university is the written exam (specifically long essay questions). In addition to content, when grading these exams do you take into consideration the logic of the structure and the clarity of the text?

Essay-type writing is an important tool for the students and for everyone to learn new things and to get a broader perspective to her/his subject area. Today, even more training and exercises involving essay writing would be welcome in the courses. Essay writing skills are also important for the future studies in preparing e.g.

scientific manuscripts and articles as a member of a research group.

5. Are the texts you give your students to read representative of the text they are supposed to write and support students' writing?

Without doubt, reading supports and develops essay writing skills. By reading textbooks, lecture notes and articles in your own field, you will get more familiar with the substance and you also get to know terminology, which, in turn, contributes to writing. Without deeper knowledge in your field of expertise, the content of the essay or scientific article would be questionable, even unacceptable.

6. How can students learn to understand the specific writing requirements of your discipline (courses, writing guidelines)?

Undergraduate students will be advised beforehand what kind of oral presentations, written reports or answers in the exams are expected. PhD students have personal supervision and support for preparing poster abstracts, conference presentations and scientific papers. Technical instructions given by the conference organisers or journals for preparing scientific papers are jointly discussed and gone through together with the MSc and PhD student.

7. Does the faculty have writing guidelines for their students (for any written task)?

In my teaching courses, general and technical writing guidelines for the written tasks (in the English language) are given to the students.

8. What are the most common mistakes beginning writers make when writing for your discipline?

Perhaps, the novice writers would immediately like to write in sentences which are too long or comprehensive. This results in a text which is often difficult to follow and which involves grammatical errors. On the other hand, some novice writers are too afraid of making mistakes when they are writing. Therefore, early-stage writers need a lot of support and encouragement to train writing. By making a lot of mistakes and learning from them, everyone can become a good writer. Sometimes this just needs time, patience and long-term practice.

9. If you have/teach foreign students, how well prepared do you think they are? Why do you think that is?

For the past twenty-five years, I have taught and supervised numerous foreign undergraduate and PhD students, participated in Erasmus and different bilateral exchange programmes. The ability of the international students to use the English language in daily situations such as oral communication, reading and writing has been improved a lot and is generally at quite a good level. However, there are great

differences depending on the country and region where the students are coming from. The visiting students from the Scandinavian countries have all, without exception, very good knowledge of English. But again, their oral skills are usually better than their written skills. The students coming from Southern and Eastern Europe have satisfactory to good knowledge of English, but during their visiting period they usually progress and develop a lot in using the English language. It is important to encourage and help the students from the beginning of their visit to improve their skills in both oral and written English. Their motivation in learning the English language is also very high, since without such knowledge it would not be possible to follow the teaching in their speciality at the host university and recent scientific trends or achievements. Today, English is indeed “the language of science”.

10. Can you offer tips for writing academic written assignments for your discipline?

Preliminary work by reading and searching relevant information from various databases greatly supports academic written assignments. It is also useful to discuss and consult established researchers regarding specific subject matters and current trends in research work. They could also advise and give technical hints in scientific writing. In the case of experimental laboratory sciences, laboratory notebooks are often a valuable source of information for preparing academic written assignments. As regards scientific articles, it is usually most effective to start by writing poster abstracts and presentations in scientific meetings, and subsequently, extend these presentations step-by-step into the final manuscript and full article.

Maret Ahonen, Programme Manager, Bachelor’s Degree of Business Administration, University of Tartu

1. What are the general criteria of good writing in your discipline?

In our international bachelor’s programme we ask students to write according the APA guidelines. The rules and regulations are introduced during the first Introduction to Studies course.

2. How well prepared for writing do you think your students are when entering their bachelor’s studies?

I cannot talk about all students entering bachelor’s studies but I can talk only about international students studying Business Administration. It’s difficult to say as there are a lot of individual differences as well as cultural differences, and our first assessment of their writing skills is based on the motivation letter they write. However, in the first year of their studies, students are generally quite unprepared, specifically when it comes to understanding the goal of the writing assignment, how to develop

a discussion, whether it is an essay or something else, like a synopsis or report.

3. What type of writing do the students in your disciplines have to do?

Students have many home writing tasks, such as reports, essays, synopses, or a summary of an article or several articles. They have to synthesise different information, analyse it, which turns out to be relatively difficult. Some lecturers ask them to display or organise their knowledge in graphs, which is also challenging for some students. Also, students have to write case studies and provide solutions to various problems depending on the course and learning objectives.

4. One of the most common writing assignments at university is the written exam (specifically long essay questions). In addition to content, when grading these exams do you take into consideration the logic of the structure and the clarity of the text?

To my knowledge we do not specifically have long essay type questions on written exams. Most of the writing is done as home assignments, except for the research paper or degree paper, which is a major writing task. If they receive essay type question on written exams, they will be based on questions that enable to demonstrate facts and the knowledge acquired.

5. Are the texts you give your students to read representative of the text they are supposed to write and support students' writing?

It can vary depending on the lecturer and course. As a general rule, we ask them to read scientific articles, and we want them to follow the same format in their research papers and thesis. However, not specifically for essays, although it would be useful. But on the other hand, writing style across academic journals differs. Of course, we also prepare them for business writing, which is completely different. The course Business Communication provides this kind of skills.

6. How can students learn to understand the specific writing requirements of your discipline (courses, writing guidelines)?

We have a specific guideline they have to follow. In regards to Business Administration programme students, it is a guidebook "APA: The Easy Way!", which we have made available for students in our library and some major aspects are covered during the intensive course Introduction to Studies. In addition, supervisors play an important role in the development and understanding of the requirements. Also, throughout the process of writing we support the students and monitor their process.

7. Does the faculty have writing guidelines for their students (for any written task)? What does it contain?

Yes, the guidelines are available on our website and APA guidelines can be found in the book I mentioned earlier. The guidelines contain examples, general layout requirements, how to write and format, how to cite, what kind of language to use, etc. It is quite well described what students need to do, what is required and expected.

8. What are the most common mistakes beginning writers make when writing for your discipline?

It is hard to tell in terms of discipline. I can tell only what I have noticed. For example, colloquial language is a very common mistake. They are just not aware of academic language yet. Their language is often the kind of language that is used in business reports, or their writing resembles an article summary. Students often write in the way they would talk with a friend and it is often unclear if the writing is based on their own thoughts or on somebody else's.

9. How well do your faculty's graduating students write?

It is hard to generalise. The style and understanding differs a lot.

10. Is there a common understanding of the role of writing when assessing students' written assignments? If there is, what is this common understanding?

The common understanding is established in the guidelines and we ask students to follow them. In addition, clarity is very important for us all. They will get better grades if the ideas are clearly stated and when the writing has a beginning and a conclusion or an appropriate end. Organisation is everything, and the more organised the arguments are, the higher the grade in case it meets the requirements set for the content, of course.

11. If you have/teach foreign students, how well prepared do you think they are?

At the beginning, we overestimated the writing skills of the students. We realised that students came in with very different skills and we developed the intensive course Introduction to Studies where we introduce writing requirements and the APA style guidebook.

12. Can you offer tips for writing academic written assignments for your discipline?

I do not know if it is a discipline-wide tip but it is practical if the piece of writing has a short abstract. Or in other words, put the main ideas in one small paragraph at the beginning of your essay or report. Be brief, short, say what it is about, why the topic is important, what you did, what did you get as a result. I would also suggest students who have problems with the writing process to go to AVOK, or we might consider inviting a consultant from AVOK to our department.

Heiko Pääbo, Lecturer, PhD, Head of the Centre for Baltic Studies

1. What are the general criteria of good writing in your discipline?

The general criteria for good academic writing are the independence of work in analysing a theory or contributing to the theory, developing a new model of analysis, and presenting strong independent arguments. Arguments in academic text should not be taken from other sources; the writer's own thinking should be visible in the text. It should yield new knowledge, and, of course, present solid argumentation. One should not just summarise existing works, but the writing concerns both students and scholars. A logical structure and the coherence of different parts is important. Finally, it should be easily readable. One should quickly grasp the main point of the text.

2. How well prepared for writing do you think your students are when entering their Bachelor's studies?

Students' writing skills vary a lot. Some students are already well trained; they know how to build up texts. Students from Russia and Ukraine, for example, are quite well trained in making a "referaat" (review), but often they are not skilled in demonstrating independent thinking. They often have problems with citing sources. Students from Germany, the UK, the US, etc. have better understanding about text writing. Students from the US have to write essays very often, so they do not care much about reading books and citing; they think they have their own good ideas. When I instruct them to check the guidelines then usually the results are quite good. On the whole, the level of students' writing is culture-related.

3. What type of writing do the students in your disciplines have to do? (Specify with: essays, long essay questions in exams, theses, research papers). Please specify for what study level this applies.

Students have to write essays and research papers. Essays reflect trains of thought about certain objects. Research papers focus on the study of a certain topic, collecting relevant data about theories, and finally they should have some findings. In addition, students have to write a reading diary where they include reviews of the most important topics in the text they have read. In some classes, students have to write one page reading reflection papers.

4. One of the most common writing assignments at university is the written exam (specifically long essay questions). In addition to content, when grading these exams do you take into consideration the logic of the structure and the clarity of the text?

In general, if they are given long essay exam questions, which they usually do not receive from me, structure is not the most important assessment criterion. But, if the answers are poorly written, the assessment will likely be influenced by the poor structure.

5. Are the texts you give your students to read representative of the text they are supposed to write and support students' writing? If so, please clarify, and if no, why not?

Academic texts which students have to read support their writing; these are built up the way students are supposed to build up their texts. Reading academic texts should give students patterns how to write. But it is a good question how helpful they actually are. There is, surely, a difference between journal articles, policy papers and newspaper articles. The majority of the texts read by students are academic, presenting theory, methodology, resources and analysis. Actually, all published articles meet the requirements of academic writing. Students are expected to follow the same requirements. Everything students write is a mini-version of a dissertation. I don't know how well students understand this by reading these texts.

6. How can students learn to understand the specific writing requirements of your discipline (courses, writing guidelines)?

There is no special course about writing. Students can take an academic writing course, but I am not sure how many of them actually do it. The lecturer of academic writing is definitely a very good expert. Some students consider themselves good writers; they do not care to bother themselves with the course. Some students are definitely good writers. Most of the students learn writing starting with their first assignments. But there are also methodology courses for two semesters. In master's seminars still it seems that students hear things for the first time.

7. Does the faculty have writing guidelines for their students (for any written task)? What does it contain?

About half of the existing master's theses' guidelines deal with legal consequences. Besides, one part of the guidelines is dedicated to the technical requirements of the master's thesis: length of the text, formatting, references, plagiarism etc. Actually there are no guidelines, how to build up an argument in academic writing. Maybe there are in some other faculties. In general, guides for building a text are missing. In the Baltic Sea Region Studies MA programme we have guidelines which are also more about writing and what should be part of the dissertation. Although we are part of the Institute of Government and Politics, our programme has had our own guidelines that should be compatible with the institute ones that I described.

8. What are the most common mistakes beginning writers make when writing for your discipline?

The most common mistake of novice writers in research papers is poor understanding of the importance of relevant theories. Students introduce theories in their writing because they have to, but they do not grasp the role of these theories; they do not understand why these should be there, except that it is demanded. The reviewed theories are not connected with the students' subsequent text. Students sometimes develop arguments which contradict with the reviewed theories. In research papers, some students want to use all possible methods; the result is confusion. A paper should be focused; quite a common problem is the lack of focus. Students cannot build arguments. They state something and draw conclusions without proving statements.

Plagiarism is a problem: accidental or deliberate plagiarism. Sometimes it is accidental; students even do not know they are plagiarising. In a few cases it has happened by mistake. For example, if a student claims that it is a mistake, and 95% of the text is copied, it is difficult to talk about it as a mistake. In one occasion, a student's text was a direct copy from Wikipedia. In some cases, plagiarism is made more cleverly – some words or parts of the original text are taken out. Changes in the language level give intuition that it might be plagiarism, then. Still, the volume of voluntary plagiarism is constantly increasing. It should be taken seriously.

9. How well do your faculty's graduating students write (on the bachelors', master's and doctoral levels)?

On average, the level of MA and PhD students in academic writing is high. Some dissertations are exceptionally good. Some MA students still have poor writing quality. Nevertheless, these students do not bother to attend seminars in which their work could be discussed. In seminars, students can test the quality of their texts on other students – whether they present comprehensible argumentation. Students do not understand the importance of this. Nothing happens if they do not attend the seminars.

In general, in almost every course, my students have to write texts. If they do not practice writing during their studies, they cannot write their thesis later.

10. Is there a common understanding of the role of writing when assessing students' written assignments?

There is no common policy in writing. It is confusing for students. There is some general understanding of defence committees within one institute. Generally, writing is discipline and course specific; so expectations for texts are diverse. Analysis, theory-relatedness etc. is certainly common in different disciplines.

11. Can you offer tips for writing academic written assignments for your discipline?

I encourage independent thinking. My tip for academic assignments is to be explicit – it should be visible and understandable where one's ideas come from.

Do not write the night before the deadline; the result will be poor. Write the text, leave it for a couple of days, then read it again and revise.



