Writing at University

Becoming a university student means becoming a writer. Writing is likely to be central to many aspects of your study, including note taking, communication with staff and fellow students, completing assignments, and examinations.

Writing can be...

- A thinking tool
- A way to organise thought
- A method of recording information
- A means to communicate

The way you write will depend on your purpose. Sometimes it can be messy and unstructured, for example, if you are thinking through a new idea. In many cases at university, you will be asked to produce well structured, formal academic writing.

Starting Points

Learning a new skill, such as academic writing, can feel overwhelming at first. Be reassured that every successful academic writer has had to work hard at their writing, and that with consistent effort your own writing will improve as well.

- Developing your academic writing style takes time
  - Expect a learning curve in your new study environment
- Reading is key to writing
  - Make a habit of noticing features of effective writing when researching for assignments
- Writing style and expectations vary between study areas
  - Follow instructions from teaching staff carefully
  - Read and use feedback from your past assignments
- Support is available when you need it
  - Book in with a Student Learning Advisor for a consultation
  - Contact Disability if you have a Learning Disability, or suspect you may have one

Academic Writing

Whilst there will be different expectations for the structure and style of writing in different study areas, there are some common features of academic writing. In general, writing at university should be:

- Formal
- Concise
- Objective
- Supported by reliable evidence
Formal style

Vocabulary

- Use single verbs instead of phrasal verbs
  - ‘established’ instead of ‘set up’
  - ‘investigate’ instead of ‘look into’

- Choose noun forms over verb forms (this is also known as nominalisation)
  - ‘an increase in numbers’ instead of ‘numbers were increasing’
  - ‘nation-wide concern’ instead of ‘the entire nation was becoming concerned’

- Use specialist vocabulary from your study discipline

Grammar

- Use complete words instead of contractions
  - ‘do not’ instead of ‘don’t’

- In general, use statements rather than questions
  - ‘This can be explained by...’ rather than ‘How can this be explained?’

- Passive sentences can help your writing sound more objective
  - ‘The results can be seen...’ instead of ‘You can see the results...’

Writing concisely

Academic writing should be clear and to the point. The aim is to communicate the main ideas to the reader in a direct and efficient way. This means that there is no need to make your writing sound complicated.

- Clarity is valued over complexity
  - Make sure your message is clear

- Plan your writing in advance
  - This help you to meet your word limits without needing to pad out your writing

Writing objectively

Taking an objective position rather than a subjective position enhances the credibility of your work. Objectivity is one of the core features of academic writing.

- Use third person unless instructed otherwise
  - Avoid using ‘I’, ‘we’ and ‘our’
  - Passive sentences can help avoid using first person (example above)

- Use neutral statements rather than emotive or value-based ones

Using evidence in your writing

It is essential that the information you present in your university writing is supported by scholarly evidence, and that this evidence is referenced using the correct referencing style. For detailed guidance, please see the Referencing handout.