



How to approach academic writing

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Fiona Ellwood¹

says that writing at a higher level

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One of the greatest challenges in academic writing is knowing where to start and what is expected. This can be particularly challenging if you have perhaps not written or been part of writing academic pieces. Those who have undertaken university level education may find this less challenging, but this is not always the case. There is certainly an art to writing at a higher level and whilst it may be a gift to some, more often, it is an art, a craft and comes with practice and experience.

The purpose of this article is to shed some light on many of the unknowns of academic writing and to take away some of the myths and untruths. Primarily the article will focus upon academic writing at university, but once this is mastered it must be noted that it is a skill that will prove invaluable in article and paper writing and is likely to help in preparation of reports and responses to consultations and so much more.

With the focus upon an academic paper, one of the first tips is to ensure the module handbook and task in hand is understood and the expectations are clear. It may be that at first there is a whole new meaning to words and an element of confusion. As noted earlier, academic writing is an art and a craft and when writing for the purpose of addressing a university module there are clearly defined components that must be met. So, whilst you have the autonomy to select the focus, there are almost always defined parameters and requirements that must be adhered to, to at least receive a satisfactory mark.¹

Before doing this, it is perhaps pertinent to discover how you best learn, how you intend to gather and store relevant information and how to establish a best way of working. One of the most useful tips is to plan and structure the paper, design an outline and a timeline. This will help you manage your time well and help you to focus.

Almost always a module will have a subject focus for example, in an evidence-based practice module, designed to help you prepare for the writing of a final dissertation. You may be faced with the following assessment task:

Report: 3,500 words (+/- 10%)¹

A critical report, which provides evidence of the acquisition of the knowledge, skills and understanding required to devise, plan, implement, analyse, critically evaluate, and synthesise a small-scale piece of educational research at level 7.

So, to avoid 'writer's block'² when faced with such a task, it is important to break the task down. The important features are:

- Produce a 'critical report' - this determines the format that is expected
- Number of words 3,500 give or take 10% - this allows you to divide the paper into sections and get a feel for how many pages will be required.

Looking closely at the assessment task there are other important words of meaning:

- Evidence of
- Acquisition of knowledge, skills and understanding
- Devise, plan, implement
- Analyse, critically evaluate and synthesise
- Small-scale piece of educational research.

Look for the concept words, the function words, and the scope of the task. It is so important to break the task down and equally to look at the task against the learning outcomes. In this instance the learning outcomes were:

- Evidence a critical understanding of educational research planning and design
- Critically analyse and evaluate a range of research methods and approaches used in educational research.

This now sets the scene to read and write... but does it, if you have never undertaken this type of task before?

The fundamentals of academic writing

The fundamentals of producing a paper begins very early on and can inevitably be determined by your engagement with the module. Every module provides a suggested reading list; some of those on the list are core reading and others are additional suggestions, but the reading does not stop there.³ This could be referred to as a deep dive into the topic, but even the reading needs to be planned. There is no need to read everything you can find on the central topic, in fact the setting of your reading parameters will

serve you well;^{4,5,6} this is something discussed further on in the article.

Developing academic writing skills

No one style of writing fits all eventualities or all university conventions; academic English is more formal than much of the spoken language itself. There may be a need to become familiar with new technical terms and extend your vocabulary.⁷

Academic writing can be:

- Descriptive
- Argumentative
- Evaluative
- Personal.

The type of academic writing when addressing a university module is most likely to be pre-determined within the task, as is the structure. It can be useful to outline the sections and identify the word count per section. On average a paper of 2,500 words would have an introduction of approximately 200 words and a conclusion of 300 words, leaving 2,000 words for the body of the paper. Always confirm what is and what is not included in the word count.

Top tips for writing:^{8,9,10}

- Make use of technology
- Check the guidance on font size and style and line spacing
- Read well; set parameters - consider the currency of the information, the source, the type of information, is it evidence-based, is there any bias. Consider counter arguments, differing perspectives. Build a scaffold and develop your own understanding. This will in turn inform your writing
- If using numbers confirm that they can be trusted
- Confirm if tables and pictures are allowed in the body of the text
- Be aware of the required referencing style¹¹
- Avoid plagiarism and reference as you go along
- Develop a note-making style¹²
- Plan and structure the paper, identifying key milestones and timelines
- Write your introduction last
- Write words in full; avoid shorthand and acronyms
- Be impersonal - avoid personal pronouns such as I/we/you; check if the third person is a requirement of the writing
- Consider the sentence construction
- Be objective
- Be precise
- Write a first draft
- Engage with module lead and act upon feedback
- Write a final draft

- Proofread before submitting and do not leave submitting the paper to the last minute.

Making broader use of these newfound skills can bring new and different opportunities and has the potential to arm you with the confidence to write in different spheres and contribute to debates and discussions. When it comes to writing for established journals you are likely to find that academic writing will have prepared you well.

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Editor's note:

DCP research issue

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