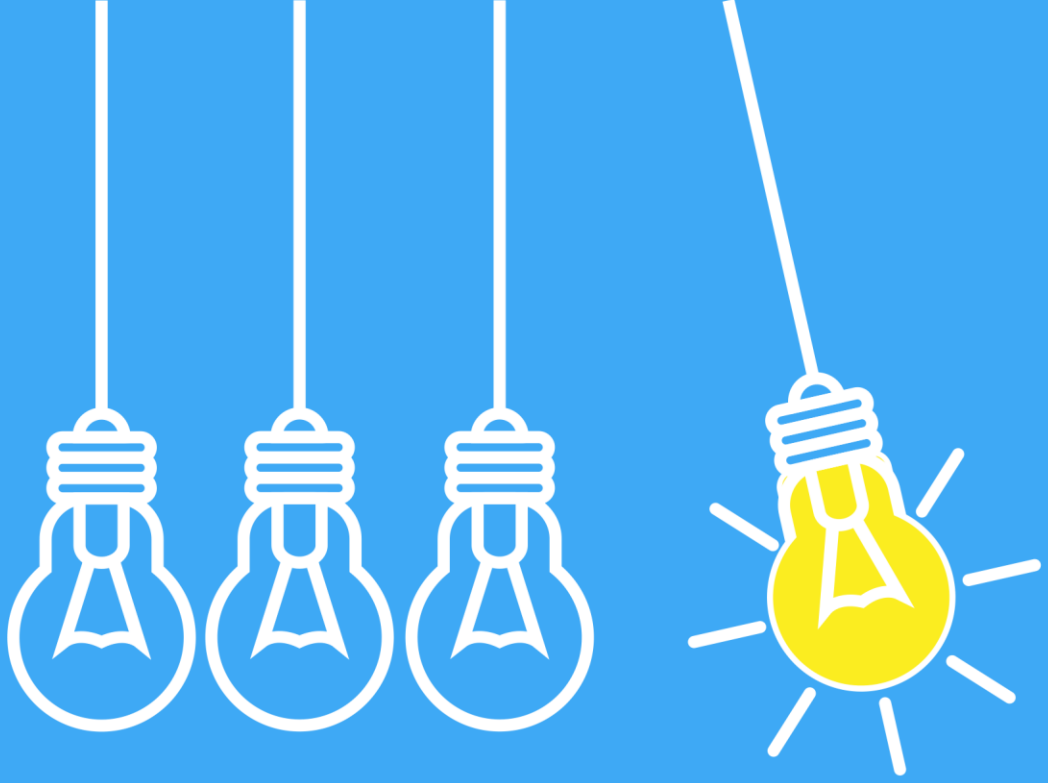

Improving Your Writing

A Guide by

Dr Chloe Alexander

Dr David Rennie

The Student Learning Service

1495 UNIVERSITY OF ABERDEEN

www.abdn.ac.uk/sls

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Introduction

Academic writing can be challenging for several reasons. In many university courses, for example, in the Arts and Social Sciences, assessment is often based on written essays. In these courses, students learn about relevant subject material, but they may not necessarily receive instruction on the format essays should take. Furthermore, despite having the required grades to study at university, there is no guarantee students will begin their degree with the skills required to write a good essay. Others may arrive at university to study a subject at master s level, where previously the assessment for that subject was not based around a significant written element.

Before continuing, it is important to note that the skills required for good academic writing take time to acquire. Successful academic writing relies on learning a key group of distinct, but related, competencies: critical thinking, structuring essays, using sources effectively, and writing in grammatically correct English. It can take years to master these activities, so it is not unusual to occasionally feel writing at university can be challenging. Indeed, even experienced scholars and writers can benefit from feedback about their writing. This guide is intended as an introduction to writing at university. It is not designed to teach you essay writing, sentence construction, and grammar. Instead, we aim to provide a general overview in order to highlight problems typically arising in these areas. We also include a current list of writing resources available within the university and beyond. Ultimately, your writing will only improve if you are willing to invest the necessary time and effort. Fortunately, there are many people at the University of Aberdeen who will gladly assist you.

Dr Chloe Alexander and Dr David Rennie, 2020

Essay Writing

Understanding the Question

One of the most common pitfalls of academic writing occurs when a student submits an essay that fails to answer the question. Sadly, this means no matter how good the submitted essay is, it cannot be awarded a top grade. It is crucial, therefore, to take your time and make sure you fully understand what the question is really asking you to do. Carefully reading the question can, furthermore, inform how you structure your essay, help you determine what kinds of evidence you will need, and suggest how you can use critical thinking and argument to construct your answer.

There are three main types of words in essay questions:

- **Task words**: You will no doubt have noticed words such as *argue*, *critique*, *discuss*, and *reflect* in essay questions. These are known as **task words**: they identify the key activity the question is asking you to perform.
- **Subject words**: These identify what subject[s] your essay will need to address in terms of, for example, historical period, intellectual theory, particular individuals, or geographical location.
- **Limiting / context words**: These narrow or limit the way you answer the question by asking you to focus on a specific context or range.

For example:

- 'Examine how F. Scott Fitzgerald uses symbolism to comment on American society's economic inequality in his novel *The Great Gatsby*?'

If we were to think about this question in terms of **task words**, **subject words**, and **limiting words**, we could break down the question as follows:

Examine how **F. Scott Fitzgerald** uses **symbolism** to **comment** on **American society s economic inequality** in his novel ***The Great Gatsby***?

- **Task word**: *examine*
- **Subject matter**: *Fitzgerald*, *symbolism*, *American society*, *The Great Gatsby*
- **Limiting words**: *economic inequality*

Therefore, to recap, we now know exactly what the question is asking: the question requires the student to *examine* how *Fitzgerald* uses *symbolism* in *The Great Gatsby* to *comment* on *American society*, with particular reference to *economic inequality*. You are not being asked merely to summarise the symbolism in the novel, or to talk about how symbolism is used in a general sense. The question asks about the relationship between symbolism and economic inequality; thus, we know this should be the focus of the essay. If you break up your essay question using this method, there is less chance of mistaking what you are really being asked to do.

In summary, when looking at an essay question:

- Write the question you are answering at the top of the page.
- Identify the task words: *analyse*, *describe*, *critically evaluate*?
- Identify the topic words: what key terms you are writing about?
- Identify any limiting words: are you looking at a particular range / group?

Once the question has been carefully considered, the next step is to think about how to answer it. One way to do this is to begin thinking about the kinds of research materials you will need. Consulting your course guide and texts mentioned in lectures should give you a firm basis in terms of what resources you will need. Initially, you might look for sources providing a more general overview of the topic. To stay with the question above, it would be sensible to search for a few general sources about F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby*, and some historical works covering the economic landscape of 1920s America. Then, however, you could refine your search by looking for sources which examine literary symbolism in general and as it features in Fitzgerald s work.

By looking at your course guide and searching the library s **Primo database**, you should be able to make a list of all the resources you intend to consult. It can be helpful to annotate this list as you do your research. This is called an **annotated bibliography**. Making a note of any key quotes or adding a brief summary of an important source can help when it comes to writing-up the essay. Annotated bibliographies are useful as they can prompt your memory, meaning you do not have to re-read sources later on if you have forgotten their key arguments or if you cannot remember the location of a relevant quote.

Understanding the Question: Common Mistakes

- Not understanding the **task word[s]**.
- Not focusing on the relevant **subject** matter.
- Ignoring **limiting words**.
- Failure to ask your tutor for clarification if you are unsure how to approach the question.

Essay Structure

You will no doubt have heard structure is central to good essay writing. However, the reason for this goes beyond simply making the essay look tidy. The structure of an essay also shapes the argument of that essay and determines how well it answers the question. Unless you are studying for a postgraduate degree, or writing an undergraduate dissertation, the word limit for your assignments is likely to be relatively short (possibly between 1,500-3,000 words). Therefore, it is essential you do not try to cover too wide an array of material. Although this is a commendable impulse, it is better to thoroughly engage with the specifics of the essay question rather than attempting too broad an approach.

There are two reasons for this. If you attempt to write on too many topics, there is the risk you will fail to answer the essay question adequately. Furthermore, if your response is too wide-ranging, your essay will struggle to discuss the material in sufficient complexity and nuance. Good essay writing is about the quality of your engagement with the essay task – not the quantity of subject matter you attempt to discuss. For instance, if you are given the question To what extent did European nationalism lead to World War I , you cannot possibly give a comprehensive account of all the possible causes of World War I in a 2,500-word essay. Likewise, if you were writing an essay on Charles Dickens, it would be impossibly difficult to talk about all his major novels in 2,000 words.

Fortunately, the basic principles of essay structure provide a template which you can use to organise your intellectual and written response to the essay question. Given the word limits they are set, most university essays will have three or four main sections. Each section will contain a number of paragraphs, and the sections are bookended by an introduction and a conclusion. Here is **a** basic essay template:

Introduction

- **Section 1**
- **Section 2**
- **Section 3**

Conclusion

It makes sense, therefore, to think about how you will answer the question in terms of structure. Depending on the question, you might use sections one and two to consider two different sides of a debate. Then, in section three, you could offer reasons explaining which side is correct. Alternatively, you could even take the view neither side is entirely right.

For example, consider this question:

- 'Custodial sentences are an effective means of tackling crime in Britain'. Evaluate the accuracy of this statement.

Looking at the question, we can see the task word is *evaluate*. The subject matter is *custodial sentences* and their *effectiveness*. Finally, the question limits us to *Britain*, so we want to focus on British examples. This type of simple essay question can easily be addressed through a three-part structure:

Introduction

Context paragraph

- **Section 1: Arguments for**
- **Section 2: Arguments against**
- **Section 3: Evaluation of effectiveness**

Conclusion

In **section one** you might, for instance, draw on examples, case studies, and scholarly literature to highlight arguments in favour of sending criminals to jail. For instance, it acts as a deterrent against crime, it protects the public from dangerous people, and it may offer offenders the chance to learn skills while incarcerated. Then, in section two, you could consider arguments against the effectiveness of the penal system in Britain: many prisoners reoffend on release, there are high rates of crime within prisons, and the fact prisons are a huge draw on government funds. By looking at both sides of the argument in this way, you

demonstrate: (1) you have researched the subject adequately, (2) you understand the different viewpoints, and (3) you have put yourself in a position to use the rest of the essay to make a sensible evaluation.

In section three, you would make your overall assessment of the two arguments. This does not simply mean choosing one side over the other. You can demonstrate your knowledge of the issue s complexity and show you appreciate the difficulties involved. For instance, you might argue that, while custodial sentences are necessary for some kinds of criminal, petty crimes might be more effectively punished by open prisons or through community service initiatives. It might also be worth pointing out that the efficiency of jail sentences depends on how well staffed and funded the prison sector is. Additionally, you could highlight the importance of tackling the causes of crime. If we add all this to the essay plan, we have:

Introduction

Context Paragraph

- **<u>Section 1: Arguments for custodial sentences:</u>**
    - Functions as a deterrent
    - Keeps the public safe
    - May prepare inmates for social rehabilitation
- **<u>Section 2: Arguments against custodial sentences:</u>**
    - High crime levels in jails
    - Frequency of prisoners reoffending
    - The huge cost involved
- **<u>Section 3: Evaluation of effectiveness:</u>**
    - Custodial and non-custodial sentences
    - Funding and experience of the prison sector
    - Combatting social conditions which cause crime

Conclusion

This is just a suggestion for how you could plan such an essay. Essay structure can be altered depending on the question and the word-count. Rather than a ‘for-against-evaluate’ model, you might, for instance, break a larger topic up into three or four sections:

- **Introduction 1**
- **Context paragraph 2**
- **<u>Section (1): Topic A</u>**
    - **3**
    - **4**
- **<u>Section (2): Topic B</u>**
    - **5**
    - **6**
- **<u>Section (3): Topic C</u>**
    - **7**
    - **8**
- **Conclusion 9**

- **Introduction 1**
- **Context paragraph 2**
- **<u>Section (1): Topic A</u>**
    - **3**
    - **4**
- **<u>Section (2): Topic B</u>**
    - **5**
    - **6**
- **<u>Section (3): Topic C</u>**
    - **7**
    - **8**
- **<u>Section (4): Topic D</u>**
    - **9**
    - **10**
- **Conclusion 11**

However you decide to approach it, deliberately using sections and sub-sections (paragraphs) to address the question will make your writing more focused and provide a logical progression to the essay. Remember, try to use structure to break the question up into sections which you can use to build an overall argument. By the time you are editing your essay prior to submission, you should be able to point to every paragraph and identify exactly what its purpose is in terms of advancing the essay s argument. If you find a paragraph that does not have a clear purpose or which is attempting to cover too many ideas, then it will probably require some editing.

Once you have a plan for the essay's structure, you can begin to put the complete essay together:

<u>The Introduction</u>

It is good practice to begin your essay with a clear introduction explaining:

- How you will answer the question
- How your essay will be structured
- Any key literature / scholarship you will include
- Your essay s overall argument

A strong introduction helps your reader by letting them know exactly how the material in the following pages will answer the question. A vague introduction often occurs when a student has not thought clearly about the essay question and does not have a coherent plan for answering it. During the editing process, it is a good idea to go back to your introduction. While researching and writing the essay, there is a good chance your approach will evolve, and the introduction should reflect the essay s final, most developed form.

You can also mention any key supporting data or scholarship you will use in the essay. Perhaps the essay will draw on academic literature to support its argument, or, on the other hand, you may decide to highlight any limitations in existing studies. Flagging up key scholarship in the introduction signals to your marker that you are critically applying relevant sources. You might feel deliberately stating these things is obvious or even inelegant. However, having an effective, orderly essay which answers the question is preferable to a vague, rambling one which fails to address the question in a logical way.

Context Paragraph

You will have noticed the essay structure plans on the previous pages contain a context paragraph. This is a good place to deploy background information to help the reader understand the context of the essay. In the case of our essay on the penal system, for example, you might provide some facts about the number of prison facilities in Britain and current government policy, etc. A context paragraph informs the reader and demonstrates you are aware of the wider picture. Moreover, it can be an appropriate place to highlight contexts which, though relevant, you do not have the space to discuss in your essay. Often, students clutter up essays with several paragraphs of description or factual information on the topic area. Some of this material is fine, but unless you are specifically asked to write a descriptive essay, it is best to stick to a single contextual paragraph which will provide some background information. Then, you can move on to answering the question as soon as you can: after all, that is the real purpose of the essay!

Conclusions

Conclusions are not always easy to write. The conclusion requires you to return to the main arguments and issues explored by the essay. However, the goal is not simply to repeat what you have already said. At the start of the essay, the introduction will tell the reader how you *intend* to answer the question. At this stage, the reader knows what you propose to do, but

has not yet seen the detailed argument and persuasive use of evidence that will allow you to answer the question.

By the time an author reaches the conclusion of an essay, however, their perspective on the topic has developed considerably. They will have discussed things in detail, presented evidence, and explored the complexities of the issue in hand. All this puts the author in a position to confidently gather together the findings of the essay s main sections and to make it clear to the reader how that material has, collectively, answered the question. Please do not introduce any new points or material in the conclusion. Your conclusion should conclude what you have already written, and, in any case, you will not have enough space to deal with any new points adequately. It is a good idea when writing the conclusion to refer back to the introduction. Check if you have really delivered on the intentions set out in the introduction.

Essay Structure: Key Points

- Use a basic **essay structure** to break up the topic into manageable areas.
- S**tructure** will provide the basis of your argument.
- Plan the essay out to the level of the individual **paragraph**: do not just start writing and hope for the best.
- Use your **introduction** to give a clear idea of how you will answer the question.
- Consider using a **context paragraph** at the beginning to avoid filling up the rest of the essay with excessive background / descriptive information.

Paragraphing

While a good overall structure is essential if an essay is to have a clear and convincing argument, structure also applies at the level of the individual paragraph. You may have heard the suggestion that paragraphs can be structured as mini essays . By this we mean a paragraph, like an essay, should have an **introduction**, **a main body**, and a **concluding section**:

- There should be a topic sentence at the start of a new paragraph. This tells the reader what the paragraph is about.
- Secondly, there should be a main body to the paragraph (facts, quotes, summary of a case study, etc.).

- Finally, the paragraph should close with a few concluding sentences: these explain how the main body of the paragraph has helped the development of your argument.

A balance between 'evidence' and argument' is crucial to a strong essay. You need to base your claims on evidence; however, it is vital you explain how that factual material helps build an argument. You can see these principles at work in the sample paragraph below:

Another important context which shapes the effectiveness of custodial sentences is the level of funding the prison sector receives and the consequences this has on the size of the sector s workforce. The Prisons and Probation Service experienced a 20% budget reduction between 2010-11 and 2014-15. This contributed to a 26% drop in prison officer numbers between 2010 and 2015. A £100 million investment in prison staff in 2018 has led to an increase in prison officer numbers.[1] However, while the number of full-time-equivalent prison officers rose by 4,228 (23%)' between March 2017 and March 2019, the overall number of prison officers is still below 2010 levels. The effectiveness of managing crime rates within jails is determined not just by the size of the workforce, however. Current high levels of relatively inexperienced staff within the prison workforce are also a factor. 'In March 2019, 50% of prison officers had less than five years' experience, compared with 22% in March 2010 and just 6% in March 2014 .[2] Therefore, any assessment of the custodial system s effectiveness has to take into account current levels of sector funding and workforce experience.

Firstly, this paragraph has a clear topic sentence at the start. The opening words 'Another important context' inform the reader the essay is moving on to consider a new part of the discussion (funding' and staff numbers). Secondly, the paragraph provides statistical data demonstrating the relationship between funding and staff levels. Thirdly, the concluding' section of the paragraph makes an evaluation of the factual evidence in order to develop the argument. In effect, the closing sentences say: Not only does funding effect staff

[1] Prison Reform Trust, 'Prison: the facts Bromley Briefings Summer 2019': http://www.prisonreformtrust.org.uk/Portals/0/Documents/Bromley%20Briefings/Prison%20the%20facts%20Summer%202019.pdf. (Accessed 01.06.2020)

[2] Institute for Government, *Performance Tracker 2019: a data-driven analysis of the performance of public services* (London: Institute for Government, 2019), p.168.

numbers. The effectiveness' of prison staff also depends on the related issue of workforce experience.

You might notice there is referenced material in the concluding section: that is fine. You can use quotes or references anywhere in your paragraphs: as introductory quotes, as factual evidence, or as material to support your conclusions. The main point is to ensure you have roughly equal proportions of evidence and argument . You might even find it helpful to visualise paragraphs in terms of having three sections: an introduction, main body, and conclusion. This three-part structure ensures two essential features of essay writing. For one, it will help you avoid the trap students sometimes fall into when they produce essays which do not contain an appropriate balance between evidence and argument. Some students provide masses of factual data, quotes, paraphrases of sources, etc., but do not explain how these are useful in addressing the question. On the other hand, students sometimes submit essays that use hardly any source material, which gives the impression they are based on personal feelings, instead of careful research. If you make sure you have a main body and a conclusion to each paragraph, there is less chance of this happening.

Furthermore, having a concluding section in every paragraph ensures your essay maintains an argument and answers the question. At the end of each paragraph, it is worth thinking:

- How does the material in this paragraph develop my argument?
- How does this help me answer the question?
- Does the evidence I have referenced help me make a particular point, highlight any complexities, or raise any significant considerations?

Please ensure you actually emphasise these points: it is not enough to assume the reader will make connections for themselves. Taking a moment at the end of every paragraph to think about these aspects ensures each paragraph helps you address the essay task. This means you are less likely to drop marks for losing focus on the question. Indeed, taking the time to think carefully about the implications of your evidence may allow you to make a more developed analysis of the material.

Paragraphs: Key Points

- Use paragraphs to break sections up into smaller units.
- A paragraph should explore one idea or aspect of a wider area: if you are moving on to another topic, start a new paragraph.
- Think of paragraphs as mini essays.

Editing

Finally, in order to achieve your best work, it is vital to thoroughly edit written assignments prior to submission. Even experienced writers and scholars go through multiple drafts of each piece of writing. Editing can improve everything in an essay: the flow and structure, engagement with sources, the quality and consistency of referencing, sentence structure, and the use of grammar and punctuation. It is essential to leave enough time for thorough proofreading and editing. An essay is not finished once it reaches the minimum word limit. The time you spend editing and re-writing is just as important as completing the rough draft. By eliminating costly mistakes and enhancing its overall effectiveness, good editing can make a significant difference to an essay s grade. Editing is often where the most exciting parts of the essay emerge. That is because it is at the close of the writing process that you can push your findings to their furthest, most developed point. Editing alone will not turn an average essay into a great one; however, not editing can stop a potentially successful essay from achieving its potential.

Editing

- Leave time to proofread and edit your work.
- Take a break between writing and reviewing.
- Read your work aloud or enable text-to-speech (Microsoft Word has a 'Read Aloud' function which can be found on the Review tab).

Parts of Speech

We can think of English as having nine main word classes (these are also referred to as parts of speech):

- Nouns
- Verbs
- Determiners
- Conjunctions
- Prepositions
- Pronouns
- Adjectives
- Adverbs
- Exclamations

Nouns

Nouns are naming words: they refer to people, places, and things. Nouns can be **countable** or **uncountable**.

Countable nouns name specific things that we can count, such as: *tiles*, *logs*, *cups*. They have **single** and **plural** forms. For **regular plurals** we simply add s' to the base noun: one *cup* / two *cups*. There are, however, **irregular plurals** which are not made plural by adding s . These include, for example: *man* / *men* (not *mens*); *woman / women* (not *womens*); and *foot / feet* (not *feets*).

Uncountable nouns refer to things that we cannot readily count. These include **mass nouns**, such as *snow* or *intelligence* and **abstract nouns** such as *happiness* and *wisdom*. **Uncountable nouns** do not have plural forms; therefore, we do not add s' to them.

Some **nouns** can be both **countable** and **uncountable**. For example, *room* :

- 'The hotel has five *rooms* available.' (**countable**) [You can make the countable version plural].
- 'There is always *room* for more cake.' (**uncountable)**

Using Nouns:

- When we talk about **countable** nouns, we use the words '*few*'/ '*fewer*' or '*many*'.
- When we talk about **uncountable** nouns, we use the words '*little*'/ '*less*', or '*much*'.
- It is essential to use the correct word, otherwise you can produce nonsense meanings:
  - 'He is fewer intelligent than me.'
  - 'There is many snow on the hills.'
- When making regular nouns **plural** by adding 's', do <u>not</u> add an apostrophe. If you do, for example, as in *potato's, apple's* etc., it looks as if you are talking about something belonging to an apple or a potato. This mistake is known as a **greengrocer's apostrophe**.

Verbs

Principle Parts

Verbs describe an action or a state. Verbs can be **conjugated** to show 'person', 'tense', 'number', 'mood', 'aspect', and 'voice'.

Most **verbs** have four principle parts. To use the regular **verb** *help* as an example:

- <u>Base / Simple Present:</u> *help*
- <u>Simple Past:</u> (+ed): *helped*
- <u>Present Participle</u> (+ing): *helping*
- <u>Past Participle</u> (+ed): *helped*

The **verb** '*be'* has eight forms (the most of any verb in English):

- <u>Base:</u> 1. *be*
- <u>Simple Present</u>: 2. *am* 3. *is* 4. *are*
- <u>Simple Past</u>: 5: *was* 6. *were*
- <u>Present Participle</u>: 7: *being*
- <u>Past Participle</u>: 8: *been*

Person

In English, there are three different **persons**: 1st person, 2nd person, and 3rd person. These can take **single** and **plural** forms.

When we are using the verb 'be' in the **present tense**, for instance, it takes an *am* , *is* or *are'* form:

- 1st person singular: 'I *am* at the beach.'
- 2nd person singular: 'You *are* at the beach.'
- 3rd person singular: 'She/ he /it *is* at the beach.'
- 1st person plural: 'We *are* at the beach.'
- 2nd person plural: 'You *are* at the beach.'
- 3rd person plural: 'They *are* at the beach.

Agreement

The **subject** and **verb** of a sentence must 'agree' in number. A **singular subject** must be accompanied by an appropriate **singular verb**. Likewise, a **plural subject** must be paired with an appropriate **plural verb**:

- Most present tense verbs take the base form:
    - 'I help'
    - 'You help'
    - 'We help'
    - 'They help'
- However, in **3rd person singular**, present tense, it is common for an 's' to be added to the verb:
    - 'She helps'
    - 'He helps'
    - 'It helps'
- If we are using a version of '*be*', then we have to use the correct form depending on tense and whether the subject is **plural** or **singular**:
    - 'Students *are* arriving in September.' (**plural**)
    - 'Each student *is* welcome to use the library.' (**singular**)

Agreement: Common Confusions

- Not adding 's' to the **verb** in a 3rd person singular, present tense construction:
  - 'He *look* happy' instead of 'He *looks* happy'.
- Adding 's' to the **verb** in a 3rd person plural, present tense construction:
  - 'They *takes* many chances' instead of 'They *take* many chances'.
- Using a **plural** form of '*be*' with a **singular** subject:
  - 'She *are* reading' instead of 'She *is* reading'.
- Using a **singular** form of '*be*' with a **plural** subject:
  - 'The cats *is* meowing' instead of 'The cats *are* meowing'.
- Using the wrong **verb** if an interruption comes between **verb** and **subject**:
  - 'A plane carrying five hundred passengers are landing at Heathrow' instead of
  - 'A plane carrying five hundred passengers *is* landing at Heathrow' (the subject 'plane' is singular – and therefore needs a singular verb (is))

Tense and Aspect

From a strictly linguistic perspective, there are only **two tenses** in English: the **past** and the **present**. The argument here is only the **past** and **present** tenses have a distinct tense. You can say 'I *ran* '(**past** tense) or 'I *run* '(**present tense**). However, to form the **future tense**, you need to use *shall* or *will*: 'I *will* run '/ 'I *shall* run'.

This **two-tense concept**, however, is not particularly helpful when students are learning tense forms. You may have heard there are twelve verb tenses, or aspects, in English. We say there are twelve tenses because there are four **tense types** which we can find in **past**, **present**, and **future** forms.

Four Tense Forms

- **Simple Tense** (expresses general truths or habits)
    - Formed with the base form (or base + s in the case of 3rd person singular, present tense)
- **Continuous Tense** (an event that is, was, or will be in process at a certain time)
    - Formed with 'be' + present participle
- **Perfect Tense** (describes a completed or 'perfect' action)
    - Formed with 'have' + past participle
- **Perfect continuous Tense** (an event which began in the past and continues in the present)
    - Formed with 'have' + 'been' + present participle

Twelve Tenses

Here is an overview of the twelve tense forms of two verbs: one **regular** (*play*) and one **irregular** (*sing*):

- Simple Past (+ed): She *played / sang*
- Past Continuous (was/were + present participle): *She was playing / singing*
- Past Perfect (had + past participle): *She had played /sung*
- Past Perfect Continuous (had + been + present participle): *She had been playing/ singing*

- Simple Present (root / root + s): *She play*s / *sings*
- Present Continuous (am /is / are + present participle): *She is playing/ singing*
- Present Perfect (have/has + past participle): *She has played /sung*
- Present Perfect Continuous (have/has + been + present participle): *She has been playing /singing*

- Simple Future (shall/ will + root): *She will play /sing*
- Future Continuous (shall / will + be + present participle): *She will be playing / singing*
- Future Perfect (shall / will + have + past participle): *She will have played / sung*
- Future Perfect Continuous (shall / will + have + been + present participle): *She will have been playing / singing*

Not understanding the difference between tenses can lead to confusions. For instance:

- Confusing **present continuous** with **present perfect**:
    - 'She *is working* here for five years' instead of 'She *has worked* here for five years.'
- Mistaking **present continuous** for **present simple**:
    - 'It *is helping* to consult course reading' instead of 'It *helps* to consult course reading.'
- Using **present simple** instead of **present perfect**:
    - 'We *use* contactless payment for a year' instead of 'We *have used* contactless payment for a year.'
- Accidentally using **past participle** instead of **simple past**:
    - 'The car *broken* down again' instead of 'The car *broke* down again.'

Active and Passive Voice

In the **active voice**, the **subject** of the sentence performs' the action of the **verb**. The **object** is the receiver of the action.

- 'The player kicked the ball.'

Here, we have a subject (*the player*) carrying out an action (*kicking*) which is received by the object (*the ball*).

In the **passive voice**, however, the **subject** receives the action of the **verb** from an **object** which is indicated in a **prepositional** phrase or omitted from the sentence.

- 'The ball was kicked by the player.'
- 'The ball was kicked.'

The **passive voice** emphasises the action rather than who or what is carrying it out. As such, the passive voice is generally discouraged in academic writing in the arts and humanities (unless the action is more important) because it can result in vague generalisations and leave the reader unsure who performed the action. Consider this sentence:

- 'It is shown that women in Jane Austen's novels were subjected to gender inequality.'

Faced with a sentence such as this, the reader will wonder who is carrying out this action? Is it Austen? A scholar? A group of scholars? The author of the essay?

While the **passive voice** is normally avoided in academic writing, it is sometimes appropriate when:

- We wish to focus on what is being done and not who is carrying out the action. The **passive voice** is, therefore, appropriate in the sciences or in report writing:
    - 'The participants were asked to describe their preferred modes of transport.'
- When we wish to focus on the receiver of the action and / or are unsure who is performing it. For example:
    - 'The jewellery shop was robbed last night.'

Using Verbs

- Learn, or check, the formation of **irregular verbs**.
- Only use the **passive voice** in appropriate contexts.
- Familiarise yourself with the formation of the **twelve tenses**.
- Use the correct form of '*to be*' when forming **person**.
- Ensure agreement between **subject** and **verb** (singular subject = singular verb / plural subject = plural verb).

Determiners

Determiners are the little words that precede and modify nouns. They tell us we are referring to a particular **noun**, quantity of nouns, or who the noun belongs to. These include: **articles**, **demonstratives**, **possessives**, **numbers**, and **quantifiers**. There are two kinds of **article**: the **definite** article *the* and **indefinite** articles *a/an* .

The **indefinite articles** *a* and *an* are used to refer to **nonspecific countable nouns**:

- '*a*' is used before nouns beginning with a consonant sound:
    - 'Are you going to *a* party this weekend?'
- '*an*' is used before vowel sounds:
    - 'We all have *an* opinion.'

The **definite article** *the* refers to **specific nouns**:

- Specific (single):
    - 'Are you going to see *the* movie?'
- Specific (plural):
    - '*The* movies this year have been great.'
- Specific (uncountable):
    - '*The* grammar in this essay needs revision.'

However, **no article,** sometimes known as the **zero article** [ ], is required before a **noun** which is a general statement or an abstract idea:

- '[ ] Grammar is important in writing.' (Not 'The grammar…')
- '[ ] Notebooks and [ ] pens are essential items for students.' (Not 'The notebooks and the pens…')

Other types of article are:

- **Demonstrative pronouns** which point to particular things, for example: *this*, *that*, *these*, *those*.
- **Possessive adjectives** such as: *my*, *your*, *his*, *her*, *its*, *our*, *their*, *whose*. These come before the noun in a sentence.
- **Numbers and quantifiers** such as: *one*, *two, three* / *many*, *a few*, *enough*, *little*.

Using Articles: Common Mistakes

- Omitting **articles** before specific **nouns**:
    - '[ ] experiment was conducted by [ ] Biology Department at Aberdeen University.'
    - It should be: '*The* experiment was conducted by *the* Biology Department…'
- Including an **article** before general uses of **uncountable nouns**:
    - '*The* penicillin has been used medicinally for decades.'
    - It should be: 'Penicillin has…'
- Confusing **definite** and **indefinite articles**:
    - 'He admired a snow drifting over an field.'
    - It should be: 'He admired *the* snow drifting over *a* field.'
- Confusing '*a*' and '*an*':
    - 'Are you going to *an* party this weekend?'
    - It should be: 'Are you going to *a* party…'

Conjunctions

The **coordinating conjunctions** are: *for*, *and*, *nor*, *but*, *or*, *yet*, *so*. These are used to:

- Join grammatic units of equal importance together: **nouns** (*Jack* and *Jill*), **verbs** (*run* and *jump*), and **modifiers** ('He complained *often* and *loudly*').
- Join **independent clauses**, in which case the **conjunction** introducing the second clause should be preceded by a comma (unless the independent clauses are short):
    - 'I enjoy cooking, *but* I am not a great chef.'

  Do not put commas before and after the conjunction unless it is followed by a non-essential parenthetical element:
    - 'Jack practised hard this year, *and,* with some help from his coach, won the amateur tournament.'

Subordinate conjunctions include the words: *as*, *because*, *until*, *unless*, *since*, *if*, and *although.* These are used to:

- Join a **clause** and a **subordinate clause**, making it clear the **subordinate clause** depends on the rest of the sentence for its meaning. **Subordinate conjunctions** can begin a sentence as part of the **dependent clause** (a comma will proceed the main clause):
    - '*Because* of your excellent results, you have been nominated for a prize.'
- **Subordinate conjunctions** can introduce a **dependent clause** following a main clause (the dependent clause will not be proceeded by a comma):
    - 'You have been nominated for a prize *because* of your excellent results.'

Prepositions

Prepositions tell us about the relationship in space and time between people, places, and things. There are over 100 **prepositions**. These are words, such as: *on*, *in*, *to*, *after*, *with*, etc., which most commonly accompany a **noun**, **noun phrase**, or **pronoun** (known as the **object** of the preposition). Together, these form a **prepositional phrase** which explains the relation of the **noun/pronoun** to the rest of the sentence:

- 'The man ran *on* the path.'

Here the **prepositional phrase** 'on the path' tells us where the man runs.

Prepositions and adjectives:

- Some **prepositions** commonly follow certain **adjectives**:
    - 'What's wrong *with* you.'
    - 'Broccoli is good *for* you.'

Prepositions and nouns:

- Some **prepositions** commonly follow certain **nouns**:
    - 'The cost *of* diesel.'
    - 'The burden *on* taxpayers.'

Prepositions and verbs:

- Some **prepositions** also sometimes accompany certain **verbs**:
    - 'Jump *on* the trampoline.'
    - 'Listen *to* me.'

If the wrong **preposition** is selected, the emphasis of the sentence can be unintentionally altered:

- 'Jump *with* the trampoline.'
- 'Broccoli is good *to* you.'

Using Prepositions

- If unsure, check a learner's dictionary to find out if a word is a **preposition** or not.
    - *Macmillan Online Dictionary*
    - *Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary* (online)
- Download a list of **prepositions** and their definitions:

https://www.smart-words.org/linking-words/list-of-prepositions.pdf

- Keep (and update) a list of **prepositions** you commonly misuse.

Pronouns

Pronouns can take the place of **nouns** in a sentence. This is often done to avoid repeating the **noun**:

- 'Sarah took the plans with *her*.'

Here, the **pronoun** *her* refers to Sarah. It would seem strange to write: 'Sarah took the plans with Sarah'.

Personal pronouns:

Subjective pronouns such as: *I*, *you*, *she*, *it*, *we*, *they* are known as **subjective personal pronouns** because they appear as the **subject** of a **verb**:

- '*I* run.'
- '*She* thinks.'
- '*It* smells.'

Objective pronouns such as: *you*, *him*, *her*, *it*, *us*, *them* are known as **object pronouns** because they function as the **object** of the **verb**:

- 'Love *you*.'
- 'Kick *it*.'
- 'Phone *them*.'

The difference between **subject** and **object pronouns** determines whether to use '*and I*' or '*and me*':

- Use '*and I*' when the **pronoun** is the **subject** of a sentence:
  - 'Liam *and I* joined the team.'
- Use '*and me*' when the **pronoun** is the **object** of the **verb**:
  - 'The team was joined by Sara *and me*.'

If you are unsure, omit the other person. You would never say: *Me* joined the team or The team was joined by *I* .

Subjective pronouns are used when writing in the **first person**:

- '*I* think.'
- '*I* believe.'

(Alternatively, you can use *my* , which is a **possessive adjective**: In *my* opinion).

In most contexts, the use of first person is discouraged in academic writing. Occasionally, the first person is acceptable. For instance, if you are undertaking a placement as part of a degree in education or healthcare, you may be asked to write a reflective piece on that experience. Moreover, in the sciences, students sometimes have to write reports about experiments they have conducted. In these examples, the first person is acceptable. This is because the written assignment explicitly asks you to comment on some kind of personal experience.

At university, however, it is expected written work will take an objective approach. For that to happen, essays should be built around an impersonal evaluation of relevant scholarship. Therefore, in most contexts, first person constructions are not suitable. A first-person phrasing such as *I believe* creates the impression the essay is based on the reader s personal opinion instead of a careful use of academic sources.

Relative Pronouns such as: *who*, *which*, and *that* are used to introduce **relative clauses** (relative clauses are discussed in the section on **clauses**).

Demonstrative Pronouns such as *this*, *that*, and *those* indicate something without naming it. Be careful when using '*this*'. Doing so repeatedly over adjacent sentences can result in a breakdown of meaning as your reader struggles to understand what each use of '*this*' refers to.

For example:

> *Increasingly, people are leading sedentary lifestyles, using digital media, and working from home. Professor Jones recommends we exercise more to maintain fitness.* ***This*** *is a huge problem for the National Health Service.* ***This*** *is under huge strain due to an aging population and reductions in funding caused by budgetary restrictions.* ***This*** *has been caused by the huge change technology has created in our lives.*

The repeated use of '*this*' makes the passage above ambiguous and confusing. Naturally, the reader will ask: 'What is a problem for the NHS?' Is it Professor Jones encouraging people to exercise? Surely not? Similarly, the reader might wonder: 'What has been caused by huge change?' The problems of the NHS? Budgetary restrictions? It is easy to see how repeated use of 'this' can generate vague meanings

Using Pronouns

- Use '*I*' in the **subject** position and '*me*' in the **object** position.
- Avoid use of the **first person** (unless you are required to do so in a report or reflective piece).
- Avoid excessive use of '*this*'.

Modifiers

A modifier changes or describes a particular word in a sentence. **Adjectives** and **adverbs** are modifiers. **Adjectives** describe **nouns** and **pronouns**. **Adverbs** describe **verbs**, **adjectives**, and other **adverbs**.

Adjectives:

- Describe **nouns**: '*hot* water', 'a *dark* night'.
- Describe **pronouns**: 'she is *tall*', 'that is *terrible*'.

Adjectives can be:

- **Comparative**:
  - (add 'er' to root adjective): 'He is *taller* than me.'
  - (preface with *more* or *less*): 'She is a *more* interesting conversationalist.'
- **Superlative** (expressing the highest degree of a quality):
  - (add 'est' to root adjective): 'He is *tallest*.'
  - (preface with *most* or *least*): 'She is the *most* interesting conversationalist.'

Adverbs:

Adverbs describe **verbs**, **adjectives**, and **adverbs**. They tell us about:

- **Manner**: describing how the action of the **verb** is being performed – these usually end in '*ly*'.
  - *delicately*
  - *eagerly*
  - *quickly*

- **Time**:
    - *recently*
    - *lately*
    - *soon*
- **Place**:
    - *nearby*
    - *somewhere*
    - *inside*

While **adverbs** do describe **verbs**, we do not use **adverbs** after **sense verbs** (for example: *look*, *feel*, *taste*, *seem* and *sound*. Instead, we use **adjectives**:

- 'I feel *bad*.' (not 'I feel badly')

Sentence adverbs such as: *accordingly*, *consequently*, *however*, *moreover* and *therefore* can introduce and modify an entire sentence, rather than a single word. These are also known as **logical connectors** and can be used to connect sentences to develop an argument or narrative.

Sentence adverbs can also go in the middle and at the end of sentences:

- '*However*, recent studies indicate consumer trends are changing.'
- 'Recent studies, *however*, indicate consumer trends are changing.'
- 'Recent studies indicate consumer trends are changing, *however*.'

Adverbs such as *accordingly*, *consequently*, *however*, *moreover* and *therefore* can also function as **conjunctive adverbs** by joining two **independent clauses** together with a **semi-colon:**

- 'The results of the survey appear to confirm the hypothesis**;** *however*, a low number of participants makes the findings inconclusive'.

Modifiers can be misplaced if:

- A modifier is unintentionally separated from the word it modifies:
    - 'I found an *orange* woman's hat.' (Is the hat orange or the woman orange?)
    - '*Recently* she said she played the banjo.' (Did she play the banjo recently? Or did she just say this recently?)

Using Modifiers

- **Adjectives** describe **nouns** and **pronouns**.
- **Adverbs** modify **verbs**, **adjectives**, and **adverbs**.
- **Adverbs** can serve as **sentence adverbs** or **conjunctive adverbs**.
- Use **adjectives** after **sense verbs**, not adverbs.
- Beware of misplaced **modifiers**.

Exclamations/ Interjections

These are a **part of speech** which express surprise or emotion. They can be accompanied by an **exclamation mark** for emphasis. For example: Damn! , Woops! , or Hey! That s my car!

This section has provided a brief overview of the **parts of speech**. Nevertheless, you can see that a sound grasp of English requires knowledge of a range of grammatical terms and definitions. You might find it helpful to keep a list of grammatical mistakes you repeatedly make. Find an authoritative source and write down the rules (for example, for how to use articles) and list some examples. Keeping a list such as this will mean:

1. You are aware of problem areas in your writing that you need to watch.
2. Maintaining the list will save you having to go back and look up these issues in the future.

Sentence Construction

Punctuation

In everyday life we can see examples where punctuation is used incorrectly and inconsistently – or even not at all. For example, social media communications are often littered with errors. As a result, it can be difficult to adapt to the expectations that come with formal academic writing. However, punctuation is very important in the English language: it provides clarity and meaning within a sentence. In other words, it helps the reader understand exactly what the writer wants to articulate. A misplaced comma or question mark, or the incorrect use of an apostrophe, can change the meaning of a sentence entirely. Furthermore, in academic writing the correct and consistent use of punctuation is a key marker which distinguishes it

from informal, everyday communications. Therefore, in order to achieve good marks, your assignment needs to have correct grammar and punctuation.

Apostrophes:

It is very common to see **apostrophes** incorrectly used. **Apostrophes** have two main functions:

1. To replace missing letters when you write using **contractions**. For example: *cannot* becomes *can't*.
2. To indicate **possession**. For example: '*Chloe's* laptop'.

Contractions are formed when we shorten a word by omitting a letter or letters. The **apostrophe** is then used to replace this letter / these letters.

- Some common examples are:
  - *Cannot* becomes *can't*
  - *Do not* becomes *don't*
  - *It is* becomes *it's*
  - *I will* becomes *I'll*
  - *They are* becomes *they're*
  - *They will* becomes *they'll*
  - *We are* becomes *we're*

Its or It s?

When to use an apostrophe and when not to?

- Only use an **apostrophe** if the full phrase means '*it is*' or '*it has*'.

  For example:
  - '*it is raining*' becomes '*it's raining'*
  - '*it has been a long time…*' becomes '*it's been a long time…*'
- You do not use an **apostrophe** when you are using '*it*' to indicate **possession** (meaning *of it*). It is similar to *his* or *hers*, neither of which requires an **apostrophe**.

  For example:
  - 'The rose lost all *its* petals.'
  - 'The city is known for *its* museums.'

Contractions are used in everyday language and in informal communications. For example, we use them when speaking without even thinking. As a result, it is not appropriate to use **contractions** in academic writing. You should always write the words out fully.

However, while you should not use contractions in academic writing, you will need to use the **apostrophe** to indicate **possession**. If you want to convey **singular possession**, you add *s*.

- These examples below all indicate **one person** as having ownership:
  - 'the *teacher's* books.'
  - 'the *student's* essays.'
  - '*Andrew's* lunch.'

- If you want to indicate **plural possession**, you add an apostrophe after the *s'*:
  - 'the *teachers'* books.'
  - 'the *students'* books.'
  - '*workers'* rights.'

Commas:

Most people will claim to know what a **comma** (**,**) is used for: to create a natural pause in a sentence. However, in practice it can sometimes be difficult to work out exactly where to place the **comma**. This leads students to falsely see the insertion of **commas** as the solution to editing lengthy or clumsy sentences.

In the same way as we would naturally pause when we are speaking, the **comma** can be used in writing to divide or separate parts of the sentence. This will make the overall meaning clear to the reader.

Below are some common examples of how a **comma** can be used:

- To separate words or phrases in a list:
  - 'The school recycling initiative involved re-using a range of everyday items for projects**,** including: cardboard**,** plastic bottles**,** tins**,** newspapers and coffee jars.'
- To separate an introductory word or phrase:
  - 'Despite the lack of funding**,** the students were still able to launch their venture.'

- To separate a word or phrase for emphasis:
  - 'Several experiments have**,** however**,** proven the test is invalid.'
- To separate a contrasting phrase:
  - 'Although many historians agree with the main school of thought on the matter**,** some are trying to revise this interpretation.'
- To separate additional information in the middle of a sentence:
  - 'The most difficult thing to prove**,** apart from a motive for the crime**,** was whether the gang was in the area at midnight.'
- To separate two parts of a linked idea:
  - 'In the aftermath of war**,** many people were concerned about having enough food to eat.'

The Oxford comma: (a **comma** before *and*) is a stylistic choice and a much debated one! As a result, you will sometimes see it used, and other times not.

For example: 'My favourite things to eat are apples, nuts, chocolate, and steak.'

- The **Oxford comma** can be a useful tool to prevent ambiguity in a list and to help make the meaning of the sentence clearer. (Here, a comma separates 'chocolate' and 'steak' – implying the person likes to eat these things separately. Writing 'chocolate and steak' (with no comma) implies the person likes to eat these things together.)

How to avoid the comma splice

- Remember that a **comma** only indicates a pause in a sentence and therefore you cannot use it alone to join two sentences.
- For example:
  - 'Old Aberdeen is the historic setting for many University teaching facilities. It is also close to town.'
- In order to join these two sentences, you cannot just replace the full stop with a **comma**. Use a **conjunction**, such as: '*and*', '*but'*, '*yet*' and a **comma** together to link the sentences correctly:
  - 'Old Aberdeen is the historic setting for many University teaching facilities*, but* it is also close to town.'

Commas and editing: over-use and under-use!

- It is a good idea to read your work aloud, pausing at each **comma**. If you find your sentences are erratic, you probably have too many **commas**.
- On the other hand, if you are breathless by the time you have finished reading a sentence, then you should consider whether you need to insert some **commas** at appropriate points.
- It is also important to remember lengthy sentences may confuse the reader, so be ready to edit them into separate sentences.

Semi-colons:

The **semi-colon** (**;**) also creates a natural pause in the flow of a sentence. It is stronger than a comma, but not as final as a full stop. **Semi-colons** have two main purposes:

1. To **separate** items in a lengthy list or when some items already contain commas.
2. To bring together connected ideas which could alternatively be expressed as separate sentences.

- To separate items in a list:
  - 'A number of Scientists were involved in the project: Dr Brown, Chemistry**;** Professor Salt, Biology**;** Dr Kim, Physics**;** and Dr Jacob, Biological Sciences.'
- To link two sentences that are closely related:
  - 'The weather forecast for today is for heavy rain**;** I must remember to bring my umbrella with me.'

Colons:

A colon (**:**) acts as a pause which introduces something new in a sentence. It tells the reader they should look forward to the information that continues on from the previous text.

- To introduce a list:
  - 'A number of Scientists were involved in the project**:** Dr Brown, Chemistry; Professor Salt, Biology; Dr Kim, Physics; and Dr Jacob, Biological Sciences.'

- To introduce a subclause which follows on:
    - 'The discovery of the three archaeologists went beyond their expectations**:** before them lay the vast ruins of an ancient civilisation.'

Here, the information expressed after the **colon** helps the reader understand the context of what is written prior to the **colon**.

Quotation marks:

There are two types of **quotation mark** (also sometimes called inverted commas): *single quotes* and *double quotes***"**. Whichever type you use, it is important you are consistent: do not use both interchangeably!

Direct speech:

The primary function of quotation marks is to enclose a **direct quotation** (when you use another author s exact words):

- Marx and Engels (2012, p.34) declared: **'**The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles.**'**

If you **paraphrase** (put them into your own words) another author s exact words, then you do not use quotation marks:

- Marx and Engels (2012, p.34) argued in *The Communist Manifesto* that social hierarchies are based on the history of the previous generation's socio-economic struggles and conflicts.

***** Note that irrespective of using a **direct quote** or **paraphrasing**, you always need to **reference** the original source.

Using single quotation marks for titles that are not whole publications:

When referring to a book title, for example *The Communist Manifesto*, ***italics*** are normally used. However, when you want to refer to an item that is not a whole publication, such as: chapters in books, articles in peer-reviewed journals, or a short story within an anthology, it is customary in academic writing to use **single quotation marks**:

- George Orwell's famous essay, **'**Politics and the English Language**'**, was published in 1946.

- The chapter, **'**The Glasgow Highlander and the Edinburgh Irishman: John Maclean, James Connolly and Ireland**'** is part of a 2018 monograph on the eminent Scottish Socialist and Republican, John Maclean.

Using quotation marks to add emphasis: introducing a particular word or phrase:

In English, we normally use **single quotes** for this. For example, when you are referring to an unfamiliar term for the first time (it should be dropped for subsequent references) and showing your understanding of it:

- The term **'**democracy**'** is derived from the Greek, with **'**demos**'** meaning **'**people**'** and **'**kratos**'** meaning **'**rule**'**.

Using quotation marks to demonstrate irony or scepticism:

Quotation marks can also sometimes be used to show irony or highlight scepticism of the accuracy of the word or phrase. These are called **scarce quotes** :

- The reviewer wrote that the restaurant only served **'**fresh**'** fish.

The use of **single quotation marks** around fresh casts doubts in the reader s mind on the freshness of the fish served.

Phrases

Many students worry about writing academically and think that they must write using posh and complex phrases. However, it is better to write clearly and to use phrases and vocabulary that you are confident with, rather than try to write in too complex a fashion and use phrases you do not fully understand. This risks your reader and marker becoming confused with your writing and arguments.

That said, today some students struggle with the idea of formal' academic writing. We are used to informal' writing via the variety of social media channels where colloquialism and slang are common – and correct grammar and punctuation are ignored. Therefore, when you study at university and come to write, it does require quite a change in approach from everyday communications.

What is expected:

- Writing that is **well-structured** and **well expressed**: this means full sentences and arguments developed through paragraphs.

- Use appropriate **formal vocabulary**:
    - Avoid colloquialisms and slang. For example: '*alright*'
    - Write contractions out fully. For example: *can't* becomes *'cannot*'
    - Be concise and avoid generalisations. For example: '*many people think…*'
    - Avoid apologetic language. For example: '*this essay will hopefully…*'

Using the correct vocabulary:

Thinking about academic vocabulary can be daunting and intimidating! Please do not think you must change the way in which you write completely. Consider these tips for improving your vocabulary when writing at university:

- Try to read as much as possible within your own discipline. As well as improving your breadth of knowledge on the topic, this will give you a better idea of how people write within your subject-area. Think about how scholars articulate arguments and put forward ideas. Consider the vocabulary and the terms they use: are there words, phrases, or a specific writing style used regularly? Every discipline has different writing styles.
- Familiarise yourself with any **discipline-specific vocabulary** and terms. Try to use some of these words and phrases that you have read.
- Have a look at Manchester University's 'Academic Phrasebank'. This will give you lots of ideas and suggestions, such as 'compare and contrast' terms: www.phrasebank.manchester.ac.uk/

Clauses

Above all, it is important to write concisely in academic writing. For example, as we have previously mentioned, long sentences with multiple ideas should be avoided. Clauses are the key ingredients to writing correctly. Clauses usually consist of at least a **subject** and **verb**. The most common type of basic sentence has a **subject-verb-object** construction.

- 'Scott ate the pasta'

In this basic sentence, we have a subject 'Scott', a verb 'ate', and an object 'the pasta'.

Clause construction

Independent and essential relative clauses:

An **independent clause** is not dependent on another clause for context or understanding. It can stand by itself as a simple sentence.

For example:

- 'The student enjoys preparing for her seminars.'

Essential relative clauses are a type of **subordinate clause**. They are connected to the **main clause** in a sentence by a word, such as: *who*, *whom*, *why*, *which*, *when*, *were*, *that* or *whose*. Similar to an **independent clause**, they are essential to our understanding the correct meaning of the sentence. Without it, the reader could be confused as to its connotation.

For example:

> 'The painting that was stolen from the National Gallery on Wednesday is worth two million pounds.'

Without the essential relative clause 'that was stolen from the National Gallery on Wednesday', this sentence is incomplete. The sentence would read:

> 'The painting is worth two million pounds'.

Which painting is being referred to here? There are thousands of paintings in the world – several of which could be worth that figure. The essential clause clarifies which painting is being referred to – it is therefore essential to the sentence's meaning.

Dependent and non-essential clauses:

These are **clauses** which supply the reader with additional information; however, they are not crucial to our understanding the sentence's meaning. Thus, if they are left out, the sentence will still make sense.

For example:

- 'John F. Kennedy, *who came from Brookline, Massachusetts*, was the 35th President of the United States.'

This is extra information (telling us where John F. Kennedy came from). Without it, however, it still makes sense to write:

- 'John F. Kennedy was the 35th President of the United States.'

Sentences

Sentences guide the reader through a writer s ideas and arguments. You should always check that your sentences are complete, and that they use correct punctuation. A **sentence** should be composed of:

- A ***capital letter*** at the beginning.
- A ***subject***.
- A ***verb***.
- A ***complete idea***.
- A ***full stop***, ***exclamation mark*** or a ***question mark*** at the end.

Types of sentences:

Simple sentences

These are made up of one **independent** / **essential clause** with punctuation required only at the end:

- 'The essay was excellent'.

Compound sentences

These are formed by the joining of two simple sentences using a **connective** (and sometimes a **comma**), such as: *and, but, yet, so*. The sentences should be connected in order to make the writing flow better:

- 'The essay was late*, yet* it still passed.'

Complex sentences

These are made up of at least one **independent clause** together with a **subordinate** / **non-essential clause**:

- 'The student was deducted marks because they handed in their essay late.'

Note that this sentence reads better than:

- 'The student was deducted marks. They handed in their essay late.'

When writing your **sentence**, consider what you want your reader to gain: what is the most important idea? Depending on your placement of the **clauses**, the emphasis will vary.

- For example:

  - 'Because they handed in their essay late, the student was deducted marks'

Or

- 'The student was deducted marks because they handed in their essay late.'

Some common errors:

Fragments or incomplete sentences

This is when a writer begins a **sentence**, but for whatever reason (perhaps they are in a rush, they resume writing after a break, or they do not proofread their work properly), they do not finish it:

- 'On the other hand.'

Run-on sentences and lengthy sentences

Sometimes when you are writing a first draft, you will have lots of different ideas on a topic. While it is important to write them down, it is equally important that you return to your writing ready to **edit** and to **proofread**. Here, for example, is a sentence written as part of a first draft. The writer clearly has many ideas on the topic; however, from the reader s perspective, the writing is very difficult to follow as the ideas are all combined into one lengthy sentence. These are called **run-on sentences** where one sentence is run into another all within the same sentence:

The new project will involve a feasibility study which will investigate the past, present and current trends in the market and assess whether the project should go ahead, an initial costing of the project is submitted to senior management for approval and used as a guideline for project partners, and a detailed budget proposal, which will be used for tender applications.

- With some **editing**, this can be improved:

The new project will initially involve a feasibility study which will investigate the past, present and current trends in the market. The study will also assess whether the project should go ahead. Furthermore, an initial costing of the project is submitted to senior management for approval and used as a guideline for project partners. Finally, a detailed budget proposal is prepared which will be used for tender applications.

Sentences: a brief summary

- Check the clarity of your sentences by **proofreading**. Try reading aloud and stopping as indicated by your punctuation. Or you may wish to enable the 'Read Aloud' function on Word.
- Do your **sentences** stand by themselves as complete ideas?
- Break down any **lengthy sentences** into **shorter sentences** to help the reader follow your ideas.
- Consider what you want to emphasise when thinking about the type of **sentence** you are writing and the placement of your **clauses**.

Common confusions with word usage

- **'affect' or 'effect'**:
  - '**Affect**' can mean *to have an influence or impact* on something (**verb**). For example: 'excessive sugar intake will *affect* a person's weight.'
  - '**Effect**' can mean *to bring about* (**verb**). For example: 'The news had a positive *effect* on everyone.'

  Or

  - Emphasises *the impact something has* (**noun**). For example: 'The flooding had far-reaching *effects* on the city.'

- **'all right'**:
  - Never write '**alright**' in academic writing. The correct spelling is '*all right*'.

- **'alternative' or 'alternate'**:
  - '**Alternative**' means *another option*.
  - '**Alternate**' means *to switch between things*.

- **‘bear’ or ‘bare’**:

- ‘**Bear**’ refers to the *animal*, or to *carry, tolerate or endure* (**verb**). For example: ‘She could not *bear* the thought of leaving university.’
- ‘**Bare**’ means to be *naked, uncovered or without supplies* (**adjective**). For example: ‘They were down to the *bare* essentials.’

Or

- *To reveal* (**verb**). For example: ‘to *bare* your soul.’

- **‘cannot’ or ‘can not’**:

- Both describe an *impossible action*, but cannot is almost always written as one word.
- It is only correct to write ‘**can not**’ if ‘**can**’ precedes another phrase beginning with ‘**not**’. For example: ‘Jogging *can not* only improve fitness; it *can* also promote a sense of wellbeing.’

- **‘disinterested’ or ‘uninterested’**:

- ‘**Disinterested**’ means having *no vested interest* or to be *impartial* in a situation.
- ‘**Uninterested**’ means *lacking enthusiasm* or to have *no interest in something*.

- **‘forward’ or ‘foreword’**:

- ‘**Forward**’ means *going forward* in terms of direction.
- ‘**Foreword**’ means an *introduction or preface* in, for example, a book.

- **‘Have’ or ‘of’**:

- ‘**Have**’ is sometimes confused with the preposition ‘**of**’.
- For example: ‘I could *of* won.’ This is incorrect as ‘*of*’ is a preposition.
- For example: ‘I could *have* won.’ This is correct as ‘*have*’ is a verb.

- **‘historic’ or ‘historical’**:

- ‘**Historic**’ means *a historic occasion*.
- ‘**Historical**’ means *concerning history*.

- **‘irregardless’**:

- This is not really a word. It is most likely a blend of ‘*regardless*’ and ‘*irrespective*’.
- ‘***Irregardless***’ is not an accepted part of English: leave it out of formal writing.

- **‘on to’ or ‘onto’:**

- ‘**On to**’ means *onwards* or *towards* and should never be written as one word. For example: ‘He went *on to* university after school.’
- ‘**Onto**’ is a preposition meaning *onto the surface of*. For example: ‘He put the vase *onto* the table.’

- **‘who’ or ‘whom’**:

- When using formal grammar, ‘***who***’ should be used when it is the subject of the sentence, while ‘***whom***’ should be used when it is the *object*, and when it follows a preposition.
- For example: ‘*Who* marked this essay?’ ‘*Who*’ is the subject of the sentence.
- For example: ‘Whom should I talk to about my essay grade?’ ‘*Whom*’ is the object of the sentence.
- For example: ‘To whom should I send my marked essay for feedback?’ ‘*Whom*’ follows a preposition.

British and American Spelling Differences:

- **Double ‘ll’ in English:** Typically, in UK English spelling a single ‘l’ is often doubled before a suffix, but not in US English:
    - UK: revelling / US: reveling
    - UK: travelling / US: traveling
- **‘er’ or ‘re’:** in UK English words end in ‘re’ (*centre, metre, theatre*). In American English they end in ‘er’ (*center, meter, theater*).
- **‘ise’ or ‘ize’:** in UK ‘ise’ is used (*organise, criticise*). In the US ‘ize’ is used (*analyze, criticize*).
- **‘or’ or ‘our’:** in the UK the ‘u’ is retained (*colour, honour*) in the US it is omitted (*honor, color*).

Some American spellings, for instance the *-ize* endings, are acceptable in British English. However, you should be aware of the differences between American and British English. For consistency and accuracy, it is best to use standard British spellings when writing in the UK.

Referencing and Plagiarism

This University views **plagiarism** as serious academic misconduct. **Plagiarism** means using someone else's work or ideas (whether that is a written source, image, table or graph) and giving the impression they are your own. This can be avoided by always acknowledging your sources by referring to them at the point of **quoting** or **paraphrasing** (that is expressing the information in your own words). If you are **quoting**, always remember to use '**quotation marks**' to indicate this. It is also important when referencing to use the preferred style within your School.

Self-plagiarism:

Plagiarism can also cover '**self-plagiarism**'. This is when a student submits an assignment containing materials identical or very similar to work that they have previously submitted for another assessment, whether at this university or another. This is especially important if you are a postgraduate student as you are more likely to have a range of previous course material, or an undergraduate who has previously studied for another degree. While it is naturally expected many students will pursue an area of particular interest throughout their degree, and that students may use previous materials to help familiarise themselves with the subject-matter, it is important any work submitted for a present course is 'new' work. As well as committing **self-plagiarism**, any previous work will likely be awarded a poor grade for a number of reasons: it will not necessarily conform to what is expected for a particular assessment as it 'fitted' a previous one; it may not be of the required standard, especially if it was previously submitted at a lower level; it will lack the sources and references to the reading materials directed for the present course.

Contract-cheating:

'**Contract cheating'** is another serious aspect of plagiarism. This is when a student submits work that is not their own with the intention of deceiving the marker. For example, this could

be an assignment written by another person or friend, or by a commercial service, such as an online essay writing website. It does not matter whether the person or service has been paid: what is important is that it is not the student's own work. Although it can be very tempting, especially with many deadlines so close together, if you use an online 'writing service', you have no idea about the quality or standard of the work, or how many 'buyers' this piece of work will have been circulated to. The university has many methods of ensuring students who commit plagiarism are caught. One of these methods is the use of **Turnitin** which is a text-matching software. **Turnitin** compares your assignments with a range of sources, including: previously submitted assignments to this university and others, web pages, books and online journal articles. It assists the marker by highlighting any 'matches': it is then up to the marker, depending on the student's use of referencing and citing of sources, whether plagiarism has actually been committed.

Resources for more guidance on plagiarism and how to avoid it

- Here is the checklist for avoiding plagiarism and information on the University's (2019) policy on **plagiarism**.
- Click here for the **Library information on Referencing and Citing**, including a range of guides on the different styles
- Have a look at these **short videos** on referencing and plagiarism.

Further Reading

There are numerous print books and online resources you can consult in order to improve your academic writing and understanding of the English language. It is, however, helpful to make sure you go to a **grammar guide** that is appropriate for your background and current level of understanding. Some grammar books are aimed at non-native English speakers, others are designed for native speakers. Moreover, there are other books for more advanced learners and there are also books which, if they have not been updated, may now seem old-fashioned.

Online Resources:

- *Cambridge English Dictionary*: contains a section on grammar.
- *Oxford University's Lexico* site: has lots of instructional material on grammar.
- *Macmillan Dictionary Online*.

Print Books:

(Where the University of Aberdeen s Sir Duncan Rice Library provides access to these works through its online or print library collections, we have indicated this information within square brackets. Otherwise the date of the most recent version is given)

- Stephen Bailey, *Academic Writing for International Students* (2006). [Floor 4 808.006 Bai]
- Raymond Murphy, *English Grammar in Use* (1994) [Floor 5 428 Mur]
- __.*Essential Grammar in Use* (4th Ed. 2015)
- John Peck and Martin Coyle, *Write it Right* (2005) [Floor 4 808.042 Pec]
- Siew Hean Read, *Academic Writing Skills for International Students* (2018)
- Jane Strauss, *The Blue Book of Grammar and Punctuation* (2014). [Available online via Ebook Central Online]
- William Strunk & E. B. White, *The Elements of Style* (1918) [Floor 4 808 Str e 4]
- *Collins COBUILD English Language* (1990) [Floor 5 425 Col]

It might be the case that you need to consult more than one book. We all have different thought processes, and the arrangements and examples chosen by a single author may not necessarily seem accessible to every reader. Furthermore, it is worth considering your relationship with written English as a developmental one. You can learn as you go, by acting on feedback from each assignment, but it is also worth investing time in honing your knowledge and skills through independent reading, throughout university life and beyond. Below is a short list of classic' works which you may wish to consider:

- H.W. Fowler & Sir Ernest Gowers, *A Dictionary of Modern English Usage* (1991) [Floor 5 432 Fow d]
- Kingsley Amis, *The King's English* (1997) [Floor 5 428 Ami]

- *New Hart's Rules/ The Oxford Style Guide* 2014) [Available online via Ebook Central Online]
- Sidney Greenbaum, *An Introduction to English Grammar* (1991) [428 Gre]

Other Academic Writing Resources

Sir Duncan Rice Library:

The Library offers **workshops** on referencing and citing. You can find out more about these here: https://www.abdn.ac.uk/library/support/referencing-citing-218.php

The Library also has a range of **pdf guides** on different referencing styles:

Harvard:

- https://www.abdn.ac.uk/library/documents/guides/qgcit002.pdf

Vancouver / Uniform:

- https://www.abdn.ac.uk/library/documents/guides/qgcit003.pdf

Business School:

- https://www.abdn.ac.uk/library/documents/guides/qgbus003.pdf

Education School:

- https://www.abdn.ac.uk/library/documents/guides/ugedu010.pdf

Law School (OSCOLA):

- https://www.abdn.ac.uk/library/documents/guides/qglaw024.pdf

Music:

- https://www.abdn.ac.uk/library/documents/guides/ugedu012.pdf

Additionally, the Library has a team of **Information Consultants** who can assist you in finding the Library s on-shelf and digital resources.

The Student Learning Service

The **Student Learning Service** works with all students to enhance their academic skills. A range of services are provided, including: one-to-one appointments, workshops and online sessions, and online resources.

A range of academic writing topics are covered, including:

- essay writing
- dissertation writing
- report writing
- reflective writing
- revision and exam techniques
- critical thinking and reading
- constructing an argument
- grammar for academic writing

Workshops and online sessions will be listed on the online booking system at the beginning of each half-session.

Study Advice Sessions are confidential, one-to-one appointments (either face-to-face or online) for undergraduates and taught postgraduates. These sessions can be used to discuss essay writing, dissertations, and preparation for written exams, or to address any concerns you may have about writing at university. Assignments or essays that have already been marked, accompanied by feedback, can be used for the basis of discussion. However, any assignments that are yet to be submitted cannot be viewed, nor can a proofreading service be offered.

PhD students are also welcome to make an appointment, but this must be done with the consent of their supervisor.

- To arrange a for a Study Advice Session please fill out this form.
- Students with dyslexia or other specific learning differences can also meet with a Specialist Adviser: please fill out this form.

The Student Learning Service also has a range of online resources available in MyAberdeen (under the Organisations tab) via Achieve (for undergraduates) and Achieve+ (for taught postgraduates).