



Massey University
STUDENT LIFE PALMERSTON NORTH

Student Learning Development Services

Academic Writing



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Academic Writing: A Guide to Tertiary Level Writing

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Welcome to Academic Writing!

This resource has been designed for Massey University students who are new to the conventions of academic writing. Many students, including extramural, internal, and both domestic and international, may find this book useful, especially as the examples provided are not limited to a specific discipline. The book offers advice and guidance on how to write university assignments, including a section on the writing process with particular reference to essays. Another section deals with the basics of report writing, incorporating sub-sections on business report writing as well as lab report writing. When writing university assignments, referencing the work of others is integral, hence there are sections on integrating the opinions of authors into your assignments, as well as how to construct a Reference List at the end of your assignment.

As a student for many years, as well as an academic author of research publications, I have designed the book to help new students with their journey into academic writing. Rather than becoming aware of the features of academic writing through trial and error, as I have done, it is hoped that this resource will fast track you through to many of the key requisites underlying academic assignments. Indeed, that is why there are sections introducing you to marking guides, and lecturers and course co-ordinators' expectations surrounding university assessments. Further, having personally experienced the paralysing effects of procrastination and perfectionism, I have added some advice and guidance, towards the end of the book, for managing these commonly encountered obstacles to successful writing. A final section provides a range of resources focusing on grammar skills and the spelling of difficult words.

While I have compiled, edited, and revised the book, in addition to contributing many sections, other staff, past and present, from the Palmerston North Student Learning Centre deserve acknowledgement. Sections of this book derive from Anne-Marie Tokley's (2002) Academic Writing booklet, and Heather Kavan's (2003) revised edition. Several pages of this book have been reproduced from the Student Learning Centre's resource handouts (prepared by Lisa Emerson, Grant Harris, Emmanuel Manalo, Yumiko Olliver, and others whose names do not appear), in addition to Christopher Van der Krogt's (2001) Academic Writing Study Guide.

Please forward any comments or suggestions on improvements for future editions to the Student Learning Centre, Massey University, Private Bag 11-222, Palmerston North, ph. (06) 350-2251, fax (06) 350-5760, or email SLC-PN@massey.ac.nz . For more information on planning, drafting, and revising academic assignments, Student Learning Centre staff from all three Massey University campuses are available for guidance and support.

Writing is a difficult process. Hopefully, though, if you are able to read and reflect on the ideas and suggestions offered in this book, the process will develop into a more manageable and rewarding experience. Best wishes on your journey into academic writing. It can be a life changing experience, as mine has been.

Dr Natilene Bowker

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Academic Writing

Some Differences between Academic Writing & Other Writing Contexts

Writing is a skill that is required in many contexts throughout life. For instance, you can write an email to a friend or reflect on what happened during the day in your personal diary.

- In these kinds of interpersonal settings (or intrapersonal in the case of a diary record), the aim may be to communicate the events that have happened in your life to someone close to you, or to yourself.
- Opportunities abound for personal reflection.
- It is expected that in writing about these life events, you will include your personal judgements and evaluations, which may be measured by your feelings and thoughts.
- The personal stories you write in a diary or email to friends can be written down at the moment they enter your mind.
- There is no need to follow a structure, as prose on the page or the computer screen appears through freely associated ideas.

Similarly, another quality of writing in personal contexts is that it is typically informal, so there is no need to adhere to structures of punctuation or grammar (although your reader may be quite appreciative if you do so).

- In these settings, it is perfectly acceptable to deploy colloquialisms, casual expressions, and abbreviations, like “that’s cool”, “by the way...”, “slacker”, “Palmy”, “b4”, and “thru”.

In contrast, academic writing does many of the things that personal writing does not. *Firstly, some kind of structure is required, such as a beginning, middle, and end.* This simple structure is typical of an essay format, as well as other assignment writing tasks, which may not have a clearly articulated structure.

- In the case of an essay, the introductory paragraph informs the reader about the nature of the topic, which is discussed and evaluated in the middle of the essay, also referred to as the body.
- The introduction may also summarise very succinctly, in a sentence or two, your position on the issue, which is then elaborated on at length in the series of paragraphs that make up the essay’s body.
- Lastly, the end paragraph constitutes a conclusion in which you may summarise the overall points made, but obviously not every single one, as there is often never the word space to do so.
- The concluding paragraph is also a good point at which to move the essay forward to touch on implications or future advancements surrounding the issues addressed.
- Another type of structure, common in university assignments is that of a report, often organised around the identification of problems or difficulties and corresponding solutions.
 - Unlike most essays, a report is divided according to clearly labelled sections, such as “Introduction”, “Discussion”, “Conclusions”, and “Recommendations”.
 - Further, unlike an essay, reports allow for bulleted points with respect to the Conclusions and Recommendations sections.

Consequently, in briefly considering the formats expected of typical university assignments, it is clear that they do follow a formal structure, which is often less clearly demarcated, if at all, in personal writing contexts.

A second difference between academic writing and other writing genres is based on the citation of published authors.

- If you make judgements about something in academic writing, there is an expectation that you will support your opinion by linking it to what a published author has previously written about the issue.
- Indeed, citing the work of other authors is central to academic writing because it shows you have read the literature, understood the ideas, and have integrated these issues and varying perspectives into the assignment task.

- The importance placed on referring to other authors in your work can be reflected in the elaborate referencing conventions that have been created within different disciplines, such as APA (American Psychological Association) referencing, which is used in psychology, education, some social sciences, as well as for business.

Thirdly, in academic writing you should always follow rules of punctuation and grammar, especially as the end-user or consumer of your writing, unlike a friend, is likely to be very different from you and will not always know to what you are referring. Hence, it is vital that you are clear. Punctuation as well as the conventions of grammar are universally known systems (within English speaking cultures) that maintain clarity and avoid ambiguity in expression.

Interestingly though, there are other situations where you may find yourself adhering to some of the principles underlying academic writing.

- One example is writing a covering letter for an employment position, or, even, taking minutes in a meeting. On the other hand, minute-taking may focus more on brief note-taking as opposed to fully constructed sentences furnished with marks of punctuation.
- Nevertheless, in a covering letter it would be unwise to use colloquialisms for a potential employer to read.
- Similarly, it would be to your advantage to write down your ideas using some kind of structure, even if it is ensuring that you have paragraphs that contain a distinct set of things to talk about, which then can be differentiated from another paragraph.

Yet, aside from all this, there are still some features of covering letters and meeting minutes that are distinct from other aspects of academic writing.

Traditionally, academic topics have focused on abstract things, like ideas and concepts, which cannot, necessarily, be given in a concrete or physical form. Hence, while minute-taking in meetings and covering letters for potential employers draw on physical, practical, and functional tasks, academic writing is often more likely to focus on abstract processes and relationships. Yet, despite the abstract, non-material structure of some academic topics, you may be able to borrow concrete and physically oriented words to explain these abstract ideas and the relationships between them.

- Typically, academic writing requires you to clearly describe abstract forms and their component parts, their links to other abstract forms, as well as where they are positioned in relation to a general, overall system.
- Even if you are dealing with a practically oriented topic like economics, computer science, rehabilitation, nursing, or teaching, the academic practice of learning about these things will likely require you to delve into theories, philosophies, concepts, and other abstract ideas that underlie the practical nature of the activities concerned.
- Therefore, the very nature of academic writing is also different from many practically-oriented or socially-oriented writing tasks. This is because academic writing tasks require you to look beneath the surface for underlying principles, theories, and concepts that can offer mainstream as well as alternative explanations for common practices, processes, and procedures.

To summarise this introductory section, academic writing is a special genre of writing that prescribes its own set of rules and practices.

1. These rules and practices may be organised around a formal order or structure in which to present ideas, in addition to ensuring that ideas are supported by author citations in the literature.
2. Further, academic writing adheres to traditional conventions of punctuation, grammar, and spelling.
3. Finally, in contrast to many other personal writing contexts, academic writing is different because it deals with the underlying theories and causes governing processes and practices in everyday life, as well as exploring alternative explanations for these events.

This book is designed to address each of these components in one way or another. There are sections on citing authors, referencing at the end of the assignment, planning and organising your assignment, to being critical and understanding marking guides. Some useful resources on parts of speech, and common errors in grammar and punctuation, among other helpful supplementary material, are also presented at the end. Before moving onto each of these components, I would like to take this moment to focus on why it is important to develop good academic writing skills.

Why Should You Develop Good Writing Skills?

Whatever subjects you are studying, the readers of your assignments – usually the markers – need to be able to understand exactly what you are trying to say.

- Hence, in order to persuade and convince them of your argument, in which you integrate ideas from the literature to help ground your argument, it is vital that you have good communication skills.
- Generally, the only way in which to demonstrate your skill in communicating to the marker is through your writing.
- Therefore, developing sound writing, as well as research skills, is an essential part of succeeding at university.
- Further, developing these skills is also a fundamental aim of course co-ordinators and lecturers, and accords with the principles underlying a university education.

Even though assignments may cause a lot of unexpected stress, they are a fact of university life. Therefore, it is worth your investment in time and commitment to develop good writing skills. In doing so, you will not only be rewarded by better grades, but also by more efficient and effective procedures in which to carry out writing tasks, both at university and in later life.

Remember ...

- Assignments allow you to come to a better understanding of the subject.
- They provide you with the opportunity to explore something in a more in-depth and analytic way.
- They allow you to become more active in your learning as well as to become responsible for your own learning.
- They are a vehicle for demonstrating your knowledge and understanding to the marker, as well as displaying your ability to reason and write academically.

However ...

- Assignments are not last minute tasks.
- They require thought and planning.
- They are activities that allow you to form your own opinions, often guided and based on the literature.
- They also require you to turn your opinions into a clearly presented argument.
- They require you to make sure your sentences are as clear as possible because written language can be easily misunderstood.

Finally, assignments are NOT just about grades – they allow you to develop and enhance your own thinking, writing, and evaluation skills, which can have spin-offs in many other aspects of your present and future life.

Do not be afraid to take your time in learning how to write good assignments.

It will be worth it!

The following sections in this book have been designed to address how you can do well on an assignment and conform to an accepted standard in academic writing and structure. The first section focuses on a key feature of academic writing: showing the marker you have integrated the ideas of published authors. Before looking at this topic in depth, it is important to clarify the kinds of sources recommended to be used in university assignments.