

Useful Academic English

Conventions for Writing

Academic Essays, Course Assignments, Summaries, Projects, Business Letters, Reports, Manuscripts, Journal Articles, Dissertations, and Theses

1.1. Written Communication Skills - Learning to Write Well

“The secret of being a bore... is to tell everything”

Voltaire

Tips on how to acquire the abilities and skills you need to produce a range of different kinds of written texts similar to those an educated person would be expected to produce.

People often claim that they can read someone else’s mind. If this were true, there would be less need for words. As things stand, we rely on words to convey thoughts from one person to another. In everyday speech, we value fluency more than structure. But written language requires more stringent/limited standards. Keith Waterhouse argues that "...bad English is far harder to read than to listen to. If you don’t understand what someone has said, you can always ask for it to be repeated. If you don’t understand what someone has written, you can only try to puzzle it out".¹

The two main components of good writing which demand constant vigilance and hard work are:

- clarity, i.e. concentrating on the meaning of words and avoiding ambiguity, and

1. Waterhouse, K., *English Our English: And How to Sing It*, UK, Penguin Books, 1994.

- imagery, i.e. choosing words and phrases with the power to evoke something in the reader's mind.

The test for clarity is "does this make sense?". The test for imagery is "will anyone notice it?". The overall test is "will this communicate effectively?".

George Orwell in his essay *Politics and the English Language* suggested the following six rules for good writing:

- never use a metaphor, simile, or other figure of speech that you are used to seeing in print;
- never use a long word where a short one will do;
- if it is possible to cut a word out, always cut it out;
- never use the passive where you can use the active;
- never use a foreign phrase, a scientific word or jargon word if you can think of an everyday English equivalent;
- break any of these rules sooner than say anything outright barbarous. As Orwell said "A scrupulous writer, in every sentence that he writes, will ask himself at least four questions, thus: What am I trying to say? What words will express it? What image or idiom will make it clearer? Is this image fresh enough to have an effect? And he will probably ask himself two more: Could I put it more shortly? Have I said anything that is avoidably ugly?"

A. Checklist of Business Communication Principles

The five-question method

- a. A way to help make your message COMPLETE is to answer, whenever desirable, the "five W" questions: WHO, WHAT, WHERE, WHEN, WHY, and any other essentials, such as HOW.

This method is especially useful when you write requests, announcements, or other informative messages. If you omit one of these essential statements your message is very likely to fail.

For instance, to order or request merchandise, make clear:

- *what* you want
 - *when* you need it
 - *to whom* and where it is to be sent and
 - *how* payment will be made
- b. Also essential is thoughtful adherence to the business communication principles –the 7 Cs qualities– and awareness of legal aspects.

<i>Completeness</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ answer all questions asked ■ give something extra when desirable ■ check for the five W's and any other essentials
<i>Conciseness</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ shorten or omit wordy expressions ■ include only relevant statements ■ avoid unnecessary repetition ■ a concise message saves time for both sender and receiver ■ contributes to emphasis, by eliminating unnecessary words important ideas stand out
<i>Consideration</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ focus on "you" instead of "I" and "we" ■ show reader benefit or interest in reader ■ emphasise the positive, pleasant facts ■ apply integrity and ethics
<i>Concreteness</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ use specific facts and figures ■ put action in your verbs ■ choose vivid, image-building words
<i>Clarity</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ choose short, familiar, conversational words ■ construct effective sentences and paragraphs ■ achieve appropriate readability and listenability ■ include examples, illustrations, and other visual aids when desirable
<i>Courtesy</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ be sincerely tactful, thoughtful, and appreciative ■ omit expressions that irritate, hurt, or belittle ■ grant and apologise good-naturedly
<i>Correctness</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ use the right level of language ■ check accuracy of figures, facts, and words ■ maintain acceptable writing mechanics ■ choose nondiscriminatory expressions ■ apply all other pertinent C qualities

B. Keep it Short and Simple (K.I.S.S.)

English is a notoriously blunt language. Some ways to cut out FOG (= abstract language) when writing a speech, a press release, a business report or minutes are the following:

- a. Bear in mind the people you are writing for:
 - by writing clearly you can enhance the impact of the text
 - try to see your subject matter from your reader's point of view
 - put the reader first and try not to bore them
 - do not overestimate the reader's knowledge, interest or patience
 - do not state the obvious, trust your reader's common sense
- b. If you have a choice between an abstract word and a more concrete one that means the same, choose concrete. It will make your message more direct.

Sometimes, instead of A you could try B

A	B
emphasise	highlight
objective	goal, target
decisive innovation	breakthrough

- c. When necessary, *tabulate*
Some times the best way to present a cluster of conditions, exceptions or other closely related ideas in one long sentence is to split them up like in a laundry list. When we tabulate, we should follow these conventions:
 - each item in the list must be of the same class
 - each item in the list must fit, in substance and grammar, with the material in front of the colon and the material following the list
 - after each item in the list, except the last, put a semicolon followed by or (if the list is disjunctive) or and (if the list is conjunctive).

The example below illustrates the point

You can qualify for benefits under Section 43 if you are 64 or older and unable to work, and that section also provides benefits in the event that you are blind in one eye, or both eyes, or are permanently disabled in the course of your employment.

When tabulated the sentence looks like this:

- you are 64 or older and unable to work, or
- you are blind in one eye or both eyes, or
- you are permanently disabled in the course of your employment

1.2. Types of Written English

1.2.1. Business Report Writing

- a written or oral account prepared as a result of either a request or an expectation
- specific information intended for a specific audience for a specific purpose
- usually the result of special research, investigation and calculation
- part of decision-making process
- 99% we are writing for a business to act on

The importance of headings in reports

- increase the report's readability
- provide the reader with an overview of the report
- help the reader to read selectively
- help the reader to understand the details
- show the reader where to stop and think
- make the report more concise

The business report - layout

There are many different layouts for business reports. Again, you must write according to your company's in-house style. *The following are guidelines on three main report forms.*

Debriefing reports - to report on a conference, a meeting or a visit

You could organise a debriefing report using the following headers:

<i>Where/When</i>	<i>Why</i>	<i>Who</i>	<i>What</i>
↓	↓	↓	↓
Geneva Telecoms 10-11 August 2000	Product launch	New contracts: name, function	Action points

Report checklist - ask yourself!

Before writing

- What is the objective?
- What will interest the reader?
- What background should I give?
- How shall I structure the information?
- When is the deadline?
- Which layout is best?
- How do I organise my data?

After writing

- Is it concise and relevant?
- Have I checked it thoroughly?
- What are my key recommendations?
- Who can I ask for feedback?

Information reports - to update people on projects, budgets, etc.

There is no fixed format. Simply present information clearly and logically.

Research reports - to present findings of research/investigation

Title page

Include title, name of writer, date and reference.

Contents list

Include all headings/sub-headings with page numbers. Indentation and type size is used to show relative importance of headers.

(Executive) summary

Review key points. People will then decide if they should read the report.

Methods of investigation

Explain how you researched the report and, therefore, how you justify your conclusions.

Introduction

State the report's objective, scope and limitations.

The body of the report

Present findings, recommendations and conclusions, often with separate headings/sub-headings.

Appendices

Include tables of figures, illustrations, etc.

References

Number references to sources. Then list them at the end of sections.

Index

List key words in alphabetical order with page number of use.

Report extract

Recommendations

E-commerce promises to have a fundamental impact, although it is difficult as yet to predict when, where and to what degree change will occur. However, there are clear strategies which suppliers must adopt in order to meet this challenge.

Technology

Suppliers must embrace and prioritise new technology by adopting new training strategies.

Customers

Supplies must move closer to key customers and further integrate their business.

Reader-friendly writing

- Consistent and ample spacing
- Clear headings and sub-headings
- Single font with bold for focus
- Short and focused sections
- Justified and indented text
- Clear numbering system

1.2.2. Business Letter Writing

Points which are useful to remember when writing a business letter

Letters are an essential part of written communication providing a written record of transactions and agreements. It is important to know where to find the necessary information in a letter and thus be able to find it quickly. For this reason, there is a standard format for business letters.

There are a number of points which are useful to remember when writing a business letter.

The letter usually has three parts:

- the *Introduction* or opening paragraph which tells the reason for writing the letter (the subject line)
- the *Body* which requests or provides information, and
- the *Conclusion* which states what action the sender hopes will result from the letter.

The business letter - layout

Many companies have an in-house writing style. The layout below is *one example containing all the elements of a business letter.*

INTERNET CONSULTANTS printed letterhead
136 Madison Avenue, Orlando, Florida 637, USA
Telephone 0304 888587 - Fax 0304 8885888
E-mail out.con@aul.com

Reference	Your ref.: BD646 Our ref.: SF9598	December 12, 2000	UK Date 12 December, 2000 US Date December 12, 2000
Name and address of addressee	Mr Gytes Managing Director Technology Conferences California 89848		Open punctuation is used with no commas or full stops for address, date, references, salutations and closures
Salutation	Dear Mr Gytes		

<i>Internet 2001 Conference</i>		Optional heading makes the subject of the letter clear
Explains reason for writing	Following your letter of 10 December, I am writing to confirm that I can speak at next year's conference. → I intend to talk about our new XDSL models and enclose a preliminary proposal for your attention Please reserve a room for me at the Darwin Hotel →	Standard business style: vocabulary and phrases
Main body of letter		It is easy to read with consistent and adequate spacing
The positive and polite close is left justified	I look forward to seeing you next year.	
Sincerely yours		Closure
Signature	<i>J Comfortable</i>	
	Jeremy Comfortable Managing Director	Name and professional title. If you see <i>p.p.</i> next to a signature, the letter was signed on behalf of another person
Encs shows that a document is enclosed	Encs	
c.c. shows that a copy has been sent to Peter Richards	c.c. Peter Richards, XDSL Product Manager	

<i>Context</i>	<i>Salutation</i>	<i>Closure</i>
You do not know the name	Dear Sir Dear Madam Dear Sir/Madam Dear Sirs Gentlemen (US only)	Yours faithfully (UK only) Sincerely yours (US) Yours truly (US) Sincerely (US) Yours sincerely (US)
You know the name	Dear Mr Smith Dear Mr and Mrs Smith Dear Ms ² Smith Dear Mrs Smith (married) Dear Miss Smith (single)	Yours sincerely
You know someone quite well	Dear John Dear Angela	Best regards/Regards Best wishes

Internet Resources

Cover Letters, CVs, Interviews,

<http://jobsearch.about.com/od/coverlettersamples/a/coverlettsample.htm>

Job Interview tips

http://www.cvtips.com/job_interview.html

<http://topten.org/content/11.AB8.htm>

<http://www.careerjournal.com/jobhunting/interviewing/>

<http://www.pohly.com/interview.html>

<http://www.job-interview.net/>

Thank you notes after the interview

<http://careerplanning.about.com/>

1.2.3. Academic Essays - The Writing Process

The main points on how to prepare and write an essay are covered in 1.1 of this chapter.

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2. In British and US English Ms is common for both married/unmarried women.

Remember that an examiner or a course instructor is looking for a well-planned and neatly presented piece of writing, freshness and originality of approach, well-constructed and varied sentences and paragraphs and correct grammar, punctuation and spelling.

- Before anything else, think carefully about the topic or question that has been set – are you sure about what you are being asked to do? There will usually be some key word or phrase that tells you exactly what you are expected to do: *compare, contrast, describe, summarise, explain, demonstrate, illustrate, show*, and so on. Take care that the essay you write does what it has been asked to do: when asked to contrast two things, for example, it is not enough for you simply to describe them – you must also explicitly draw attention to the ways in which they differ from one another; when asked to show or demonstrate something, you must use the data at your disposal in such a way as to prove what you have been asked to prove – it is not enough simply to list the data without showing what conclusions are to be drawn from it.
- A *general essay* or *composition* is not quite the same as an *academic essay*. An academic essay, such as might be required in science, history or politics, should be as objective as possible, setting out data and drawing conclusions from it. But a general essay is usually looking for not just facts but your own personal input, a lively and individual approach, and personal impressions, feelings, thoughts, opinions and memories. There are four main types of general essay:
 - a *narrative*, which tells a story;
 - a *descriptive essay*, a word-picture of a person or place;
 - a *discursive essay*, presenting facts, opinions or arguments; and
 - a *reflecting essay*, which is much like a discursive essay but more personal or speculative.

When selecting a topic for an essay, decide which of these styles is going to be most appropriate for the subject about which you will be writing. Some essays may require a combination of these styles.

If you are writing a narrative that involves dialogue, what is said by each character must begin with a separate paragraph.

Essay writing skills do not come overnight – they take time, practise and guidance to develop. Nobody finds essay writing easy – it always involves hard work and rejection of some of your ideas and writing.

1.2.3.1. The Discussion Essay

Discussion is the most common type of essay and also the most complex. It is complex because it can involve many different kinds of activities, including for example listing, narrative, description, definition, and use of evidence. In the exercise which follows you will be given a chance to analyse the discussion process for yourself:

Discussion essay exercise

First, pick a topic for discussion. Each member of the group should make a suggestion. The group should choose one or more of the suggestions and write them up in a short discussion paper. When you have finished, exchange the papers. As you are reading the paper, look at the check-list below. Add any other criteria to the list which you think important.

Discuss your comments with the writer.

Keep the check-list handy and use it later for any discussion papers you have to write.

Criteria

1. Has the writer stated the problem clearly?
2. Has s/he defined all the important *terms* (words) which ought to be defined?
3. Does s/he support his argument with *evidence*? (see the notes below)
4. Is the evidence *relevant*?
5. Has s/he made good use of *examples*? (see the notes below)
6. Has s/he used *analogy* correctly, i.e. to clarify and not to mislead? (see the notes below)
7. Has s/he avoided mistakes in reasoning?
8. Has s/he made his own point of view clear?

Notes

1. **Evidence:** whatever point of view you take up, it is very important to support it with *evidence*. The evidence may be of different kinds, e.g. research that you have done, quotation from an authority (writer) on the subject, cause and effect, etc. A very common kind of use of evidence is *induction*. By induction, we mean conclusions which come from experience. If several of my friends are involved in accidents while riding motor-cycles, then I may conclude that riding a motor-cycle is a dangerous thing to do. In other words, we have a *sample* of events, and we *draw conclusions* from the sample. One can easily make mistakes in induction. For example:
 - a) The sample may be too small.

- b) The sample may not be typical (those friends of mine who were involved in motor-cycle accidents may all have been very careless people).
- c) The sample may be irrelevant (i.e. have little or nothing to do with the subject).
- d) The fact that one thing happens after another does not mean to say that it was caused by it.
- e) The fact that two things occur at the same time does not mean to say that they are connected.
- f) An effect may have more than one cause.

2. **Illustration:** a discussion can be much more interesting and easier to follow if it has plenty of good *examples*. Examples can be used in at least two ways:

- i) to explain something abstract or difficult by giving a concrete example:
"By the force of gravity we mean the force which attracts two masses to one another, and especially the force which attracts other masses towards the mass of the earth. For example, when an apple falls from a tree to the ground, it is because of the force of the earth's gravity".
- ii) to support an argument by giving examples:
"Revolutions which overthrow despotic government by violent means often end by establishing another kind of despotism. A good example is the French Revolution of 1789, which began as an expression of democratic will, and ended by establishing Napoleon as Emperor of the French".

Note that giving a few examples does not mean that you have proven your argument. It is sometimes possible that you have ignored *counter-examples* - the American Revolution of 1776 might be a case in point for the passage just quoted.

3. **Analogy:** by *analogy* we mean comparing one thing to something else. As with examples, analogies are usually used to explain something or make it clearer. For example, if I were explaining to someone what a *computer* was I might say that it is "a kind of mechanical or artificial brain". This may give them an idea of the sort of thing that a computer can do. Analogies are used in arguments (just like examples are) but this is very dangerous, as you can never *prove* anything by analogy. Look at this argument:

"The people of a country are just like the members of one family. The President is *therefore* like the head of the family. Children should not speak of their parents disrespectfully, *therefore*, the citizens of the country should not speak of their President disrespectfully".

What the author is saying may or may not be true, but he is wrong to use *therefore* in the second and third sentences. The people of a country may be like a family in some ways, but also unlike one in others – you cannot *prove* anything from an analogy.

Vocabulary guide: illustration

for example	similarly
for instance	correspondingly
(be) a case in point	in the same way
a case in point is	by the same token
such as	
be analogous to	can/could be compared to
comparable	to make a comparison between X and Y
similar	to draw an analogy between X and Y

The Computer Revolution

We live in the age of technology. Every day, new technology appears, ranging from mini-CDs that contain entire encyclopedias to giant space telescopes that can send photographs of distant stars back to Earth. Of all the new technological wonders, personal computers have probably had the greatest influence on the daily lives of average people. Through computers, we can now talk to people in any country, research any topic, work, shop, bank, and entertain ourselves. Personal computers have especially revolutionised communication and business practices in the past 20 years.

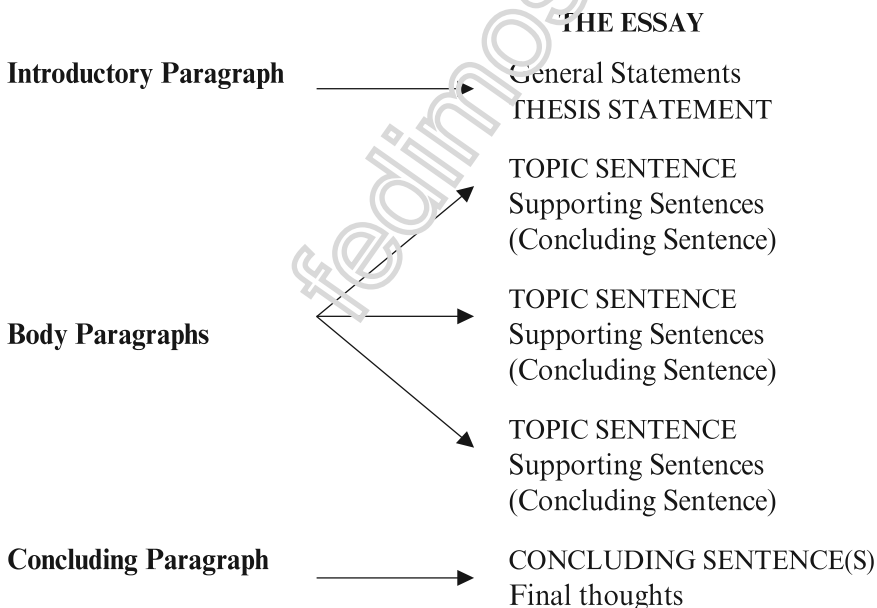
Perhaps the most important effect of personal computers has been to expand our ability to communicate with the outside world. A lonely invalid in Minnesota can talk with a similarly house-bound person in Mississippi. Schoolchildren in Manhattan can talk via computer to schoolchildren in Moscow. A high school student can obtain statistics for a history paper from a library in London. A single computer user can send an e-mail message to millions of people all over the world with one keystroke. Computer users can get together in an on-line "chat room" to discuss their interests and problems with others who have similar interests and problems. For example, a person whose hobby is collecting antique guns can share information with other gun collectors via computer. A person who is planning a vacation and wants to know the names of the best beaches in Hawaii can ask others, who have already been there, for suggestions. People even start on-line romances in chat rooms! The possibilities of computerised communication are indeed unlimited.

Besides improving communication, personal computers have made it possible to do business from home. You can take care of personal business. For example, you can buy airline tickets, send flowers to a friend, pay your bills, buy and sell stocks, and even pay your taxes from your home computer at any time of the day or night. This is a great convenience for people who are

busy during the day and for physically disabled people who find it hard to leave their homes. Moreover, telecommuting-working at home instead of going to the office-has become a choice for thousands of business people. Suzanne Carreiro, a financial manager for a large company in downtown Manhattan, has telecommuted from her home in New Jersey for the past two years. She goes to her office only once a week. Four days a week, she works at home and communicates with her staff by computer. She says, "I am much more productive when I work at home because there are no interruptions. I also don't have to spend three hours traveling to and from the office every day. I save myself time, and I save my company money by telecommuting".

In brief, the computer age has arrived, and it is changing our lives. Computers have made communicating and doing business faster and more convenient, and they have greatly increased our access to information. Just as the invention of automobiles had an unplanned consequence – the growth of suburbs - so will the invention of personal computers. We will have to wait and see what these unintentional consequences will be.

1.2.3.2. Overview of Academic Essay Organisation



The introduction paragraph

The introduction is the first paragraph of the essay. It introduces the

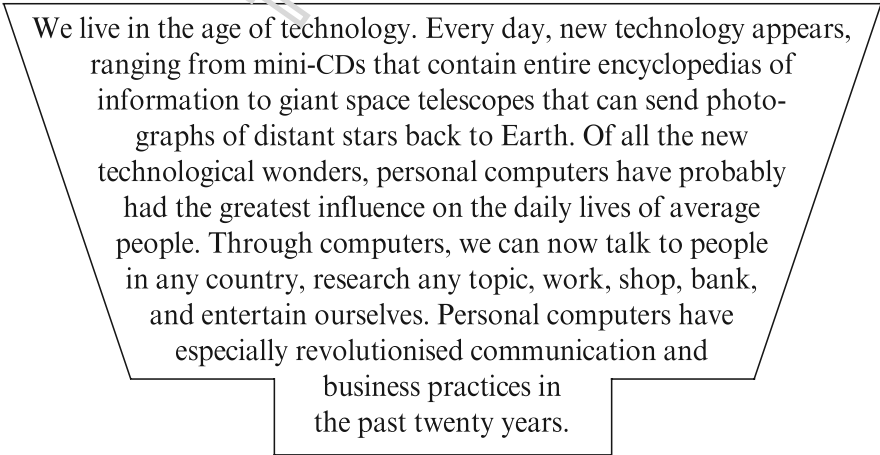
topic of the essay and arouses the reader's interest. There are several ways to write an introductory paragraph but a "funnel introduction" is the most appropriate in academic contexts. A "funnel introduction" has two parts: several general statements and one thesis statement.

General statements give the reader background information about the topic of the essay. They should lead your reader gradually from a very general idea of your topic to a very specific idea. The first general statement in a funnel introduction just introduces the topic. Like the lens of a camera moving in for a close-up picture, each sentence that follows becomes more and more focused on a specific topic. There is no exact rule about the number of general statements you need; however, you should try to write at least three or four, and they should be interesting enough to hold the reader's attention. It is permissible to sprinkle a few interesting details in the general statements in order to attract the reader's interest. However, you should not give any details that belong in the body of the essay.

The thesis statement introduces the main idea of the essay.

- It states the specific topic of the essay.
- It may list the subtopics of the main topic.
- It may also mention the method of organisation.
- It is the last sentence of the introduction.

Read the introductory paragraph of "The Computer Revolution" essay. Notice how the sentences gradually move from the general topic of technology to the specific topic of two areas that have been changed by personal computers. This introductory paragraph resembles a funnel, wide at the top (beginning) and narrow at the bottom (end).



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