



Teaching toolkits

Academic writing

In most subjects, academic writing is the biggest factor determining a student's degree classification. Nothing affects a student's academic prospects more than their ability to write well.

Higher education subjects are defined through academic texts. If a student is to fully grasp their subject they need to understand how it's written.

Many students know this but feel that successful academic writing is a mystery.

As teachers, we can help students improve their academic writing by:

- offering them opportunities to practice
- encouraging them to share their work
- giving them individual, face-to-face feedback
- pointing them towards practical resources.

What academic writing means

Academic writing underpins all aspects of teaching and learning.

It describes a wide range of activities, such as:

- reading
- note-making
- researching
- planning
- structuring
- writing
- revising
- referencing
- editing
- sharing

Putting it into practice

Set clear expectations for writing standards

Helping students improve their academic writing should be a continual part of teaching, but making time and space in the curriculum for it can be challenging.

At the start of a programme or module, review the course assessment criteria with students. This will help start a conversation about what you expect students to achieve in their writing.

You'll also need to ensure that you give students the means to reach those standards.

Some aspects of good academic writing will be procedural, for example the format for including citations. Be clear about which system you expect students to use.

Other aspects will be more subjective, such as good sentence construction.

Spending time in the first few weeks can ensure that students are moving in the right direction straight away, rather than waiting until a piece of assessed written work is due.

What makes good academic writing

Get students to think about:

- language fundamentals such as grammar, punctuation and spelling
- writing clear introductions, statements of purpose and conclusions
- writing in plain English
- revising their work, always reading it back to check it makes sense.

'Thinking Writing' by Queen Mary University of London, contains lots of great ideas for short writing tasks.

Get students to write frequently

The best way to help students improve their academic writing is to get them to do short and varied writing activities throughout their course. If this isn't done, students may only be expected to produce one or two pieces of assessed written work per module.

Short tasks done in class are especially effective. They also keep students engaged with the subject (see the Active learning toolkit on the Teaching and Learning Portal).

The wider the range of writing genres that students practise, the better.

Get students to critique their own and others' writing

1. Reviewing published works

In class, look at a piece of published work relevant to your subject and discuss with students what makes it good. Better still, do this with your own work and talk about the stages of writing.

Choose something short: for example the introduction to a book, or a journal article.

Get students to think about:

- why the author has written it
- how the author has formulated the argument
- how easy it is to understand
- which aspects of the author's writing style help or hinder the reader.

2. Reviewing coursework from a previous year group

Look at coursework from a previous year group and discuss its strengths and weaknesses.

Compare it with the marking guide and ask students to say what they would have given it. Then you can reveal what mark it actually got.

Make sure any work you show is anonymised. If you are using students' work from recent years, ideally you should get their permission first. If in doubt, check with your teaching lead.

To maximise time in the classroom, share the written work with students beforehand via Moodle.

3. Getting students to critique their own and others' writing

Get students to write something for five minutes. Then ask them to read one another's work in groups of three and compare views.

As a teacher, you don't have to read everything your students write. Encouraging students to show their written work to others (apart from you) can help them become better at self-assessment and peer assessment.

It can also make them think more carefully about what they write.

Showing work to others can help to foster a better culture of learning and sharing among students.

It also gives students a sense of how they are contributing to the body of work that makes up an academic subject.

Offer individual tuition to students

Ask your teaching lead about the individual support on a programme for students to improve their writing.

Ask your students if they've ever been invited to sit down with someone to go through their writing. If they haven't, give them that opportunity.

Sit down for 15 minutes with a student. Look at a short piece of their writing with them and explain how they could improve it.

If you have too many students (say over 25), you could offer part of your weekly office time on a first-come-first-served basis.

Particularly in their first two years of study, offer your personal tutees the chance to use a tutorial to talk about academic writing.

Resources

<http://bit.ly/AcademicWritingToolkit> to access the full list of resources, including links, in the online version of this guide.

- **UCL Centre for Languages & International Education (CLIE)** offers taught courses for students who are non-native speakers of English and resources for staff to help students with their English.
- **UCL Academic Writing Centre** at the UCL Institute of Education (IOE), provides short courses, tutorials, forums and online resources to IOE postgraduate students.
- **The Writing Lab** helps with writing through student-led tutorials and workshops for students in the faculties of Arts and Humanities and Social and Historical science.
- **Writing and Language Support Programme (WALS)** provides peer-to-peer support for non-native speakers of English through UCL Union.
- **UCL's Survey of English Usage** produces apps on academic writing (free), spelling and punctuation (free) and grammar (various costs).
- **UCL Student Disability Services** has produced some excellent guides on reading, note-taking, essay writing, revision technique and time management.
- UCL also has a licence for **LinkedIn Learning** (formerly Lynda.com), the online video training provider. LinkedIn Learning has several short courses on writing, such as writing in plain English.

External writing resources

- Guide to writing essays, the Royal Literary Fund
- Guide to writing dissertations, the Royal Literary Fund
- Andrew Northedge, *The Good Study Guide*, 2nd ed., The Open University, 2005. Book available on Amazon
- William Strunk and E.B. White, *The Elements of Style*, 4th ed., New York, 2000. Book available on Amazon
- How to write in Plain English, the Plain English Campaign.

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