



Effective writing guidelines

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Prepared by the School Teaching & Learning Strategy Group



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Introduction¹

Good writing is an essential skill for studying at university. Being able to communicate clearly and precisely in writing is an essential requirement for module assessments and is also necessary for report writing in clinical practice. Being able to communicate effectively is also the mark of a scholar. A scholar is someone who is able to discover what is already known, review others' work in a fair and unbiased way, think logically and clearly and know how to present the merits and demerits of an argument in a balanced way. A good scholar also communicates ideas effectively through the written word and this includes the accurate use of the basic rules of good writing, including grammar, syntax, spelling and punctuation.

Academic writing

There are a number of types of writing. These include creative writing (e.g. prose in a novel, poetry, song lyrics), journalistic writing (e.g. reportage, blogging, feature writing) and academic writing (e.g. essays in college assessments, journal articles, textbooks). Each type is written for a particular purpose and for a particular readership and so each type is written in a particular style and tone.

Academic writing is more formal than either creative writing or journalistic writing. A key difference is the way that the written material contains citations (references) to the work of others, usually published work. Academic writing is generally written in the third person; however it is acceptable in some instances to use the first person singular or plural. For example, it is correct to write: 'We interviewed thirty older men to elicit their views on public transport in Dublin.'

In academic writing, the individual style of the writer should not be apparent; all academic writing should adhere to a universal standard in which no individual style is obvious. Academic writing is written objectively and hence the focus is not on the writer, but on the topic and on the ideas contained in the written material. Other features of academic writing include clarity, precision and the absence of abbreviations and slang words.

This short guide includes some basic rules for effective writing and some tips on what to do and what not to do.

¹ These Guidelines were update, May 2012

Grammar and syntax

Grammar is the basic system of rules that governs the way that language, especially written language, is organised. Grammar governs the basic structure of words, phrases, clauses and sentences. Syntax refers to the grammatical arrangement of words into phrases and sentences.

The parts of a sentence

The basic parts of a sentence are the subject, the predicate and the object. The subject is the person or thing that performs an action. The predicate is the action that the subject performs. The object is the person or thing that receives the action. A complete sentence with a subject, predicate and object reads as follows:

Example: Simple sentence

The student closed the open door.

Note: The subject is 'student'. The predicate is the action 'closed'. The object is 'door'. The sentence also contains an adjective, the word 'open', which describes the door.

In this example the subject ('student') and object ('door') are *nouns* and the predicate ('closed') is a *verb*. The nouns are singular (i.e. just one student and just one door) and the verb is in the past *tense* (i.e. the action happened in the past not the present). Every complete sentence must contain a subject and a predicate (e.g. 'The man ran.')

Most nouns change their form to indicate the number by adding the letter 's' or 'es' (e.g. students, doors), or changing their spelling (e.g. women, cities). Nouns can change their form depending on their *case*. The case of a noun (e.g. 'student') or pronoun (e.g. 'she') determines how it can be used in a sentence. Nouns always take the same form in the subject case and the object case, while both nouns and pronouns usually change their form for the *possessive* case. The possessive case indicates possession, as in the following example:

Apostrophe

Example. Noun in the possessive case

The student's essay was well written.

Note: The apostrophe is placed *before* the letter 's', indicating that the sentence refers to one student.

If the sentence is referring to more than one student, the apostrophe is placed *after* the letter 's', as in the following example:

Apostrophe

Example. Noun in the possessive case

The students' essays were well written.

Note: The exception is with certain plural nouns, such as 'women' and 'people'. The women's essays were well written.

The subject and verb in a sentence should match in number, i.e. if the subject is plural, then the verb should also be plural, and vice versa, as in the following two examples:

'The student attends a lecture.' 'The students attend a lecture.'

An *adverb* can modify a verb, an adjective, another adverb, a phrase, or a clause. An adverb indicates manner, time, place, cause, or degree, and answers questions such as ‘how’, ‘when’, ‘where’, ‘how much’. So for example:

Example: Adverb

The midwives waited patiently through the woman’s prolonged labour.

Note: The adverb is ‘patiently’.

Building sentences

A sentence is made up of *clauses* and *phrases*. Clauses are the building blocks of sentences and every sentence consists of one or more clauses. A clause is a collection of grammatically-related words, including a subject and a predicate. The following sentence contains one clause:

Example: Clause in a simple sentence

The man runs on the beach every morning.

Note:

The following sentence contains two clauses:

Example: Clauses in a complex sentence

The man runs on the beach every morning and stops for coffee on the way home.

Note: In this sentence the two clauses are joined by a conjunction, the word ‘and’. Other conjunction words include ‘but’ and ‘or’.

A phrase is a collection of grammatically-related words without a subject or without a predicate (e.g. ‘on the beach’, ‘on campus’, ‘racial conflict’, ‘midwifery-led care’)

Sentences can be simple (just one clause) or compound (two or more clauses or simple sentences joined together). Academic writing typically contains a mix of both. The following example shows how sentences can range from simple to compound:

Example: From the simple to the complex

Ice melts.

The ice melts quickly.

The ice on the river melts quickly under the warm March sun.

Lying exposed without its blanket of snow, the ice on the river melts quickly under the warm March sun.

Note: In this sentence the two clauses are joined by the conjunction ‘but’.

Example: Compound sentence with two clauses

Simple sentence: Ireland is a rich country (one clause)

Simple sentence: Still, it has many poor people (one clause).

Compound sentence: Ireland is a rich country, but still it has many poor people.

Note: In this sentence the two clauses are joined by the conjunction ‘but’.

The following sentence has two clauses:

Example: Compound sentence with two clauses

The majority of older people in Ireland have close relationships with family, friends and neighbours and do not experience loneliness (Drennan *et al.*, 2008a, 2008b).

Note: In this sentence the two clauses are joined by the conjunction ‘and’, i.e. the final ‘and’ in the sentence.

The following sentence contains multiple clauses:

Example: Compound sentence with multiple clauses

Founded in early 2005, the Web 2.0 site YouTube enables interactivity, which permits users to post video content free, view content posted by others, post comments in a threaded discussion format, search for content by keyword or category and participate in discussion groups.

With careful and proper use of phrases and clauses, writing becomes more interesting and ideas much clearer. Good writing involves precision and good sentences are precise sentences, i.e. their meaning is unambiguous and therefore not open to multiple interpretations by the reader.

Tip

In academic writing, do not try to appear clever by using long complex sentences or infrequently-used exotic words. Instead write clear and precise sentences and choose words that are in common usage.

Split infinitives

The *infinitive* of a verb is the form given where no specific subject is indicated and is always characterised by the word ‘to’ (e.g. to work, to pay, to eat, to write), as in the following two examples:

Example: Complex sentence with two clauses

I was told always **to pay attention** in class.
John’s teacher told him never **to look** back.

A split infinitive is a common grammatical error that occurs when the infinitive of the verb (the word ‘to’) is separated from its verb by the insertion of another word, as in the following three examples:

Example: Split infinitive

I was told **to** always **pay** attention in class.
John’s teacher told him **to** never **look** back.
Its five-year mission [is] **to** boldly **go** where no man has gone before.

Note:

Comma splice

A comma splice is the attempt to join two independent clauses with a comma, but without a conjunction, as in the following example: ‘I would like to write an essay about ageing, it is an important topic.’ This sentence has two clauses that are independent, so it is not correct to use a comma to join the two clauses.

The following example illustrates the comma splice and some correct ways to write:



Example: Comma splice

Incorrect: I got up late this morning, I didn't have time for breakfast.

Correct version #1: I got up late this morning. I didn't have time for breakfast.

Correct version #2: I got up late this morning; I didn't have time for breakfast.

Correct version #3: I got up late this morning, so I didn't have time for breakfast.

Correct version #4: I got up late this morning, and I didn't have time for breakfast.

Note: None of the correct versions attempt to join two clauses with a comma, but instead use either punctuation marks, as in #1 and #2, or a conjunction, as in #3 and #4.

So in order to avoid this common punctuation error, use a comma *and* a conjunction like 'and', 'but', 'for', 'or', 'so', 'yet', 'because'. Alternatively, remove the comma and insert a semicolon instead.

Punctuation

The period

The period [.] , which is more commonly known as the full stop, closes a sentence.

The comma

The comma [,] is the most commonly-used punctuation mark. It is also frequently misused. There are several different situations in which the comma is the correct punctuation mark to use. It is used in the following situations:

The comma is used to separate the elements in a list of three or more items, for example:

Example: Use of the comma

The sandwich included cheese, ham, lettuce and tomatoes

His favourite puddings were ice apple pie, rhubarb, crumble, and jelly and ice cream

Note: The last comma in this list is known as the Oxford comma and is used when the two items are considered as a single item in a list

Before certain conjunctions or to separate two independent clauses, especially before the following conjunctions: ‘and’, ‘but’, ‘for’, ‘nor’, ‘yet’, ‘or’ and ‘so’.

Example: Use of the comma

She was a fantastic cook, but would never be as good as her mother.

Note: A common mistake is to put the comma *after* the conjunction

It is not usually necessary (or correct) to use a comma with the conjunction ‘because’, as in the following example: ‘We arrived late because the bus broke down.’

The comma is used to separate introductory elements in a sentence, as in the following example:

Example: Use of the comma

Having studied punctuation, it is easier to write more effectively.

Inside, the house was a total mess.

Note: There are some exceptions, such as the following: Shortly we will be taking a break.

The comma is used to separate parenthetical elements in a sentence, as in the following example:

Example: Use of the comma

John, not the most intelligent pupil in the class, was always late for school.

The Shelbourne Hotel, one of Dublin’s finest buildings, is located on Stephen’s Green.

Note: The parenthetical element, also known as an aside, is part of the sentence that can be removed without changing the essential meaning of the sentence.

Note: The parenthetical element is opened and closed with a comma.

The comma is used to separate direct speech or quoted elements from the rest of the sentence, as in the following example:

Example: Use of the comma

“Give me the money”, he said, “unless you want to meet your maker.”

The comma is used to separate elements in a sentence that express contrast, as in the following example:

Example: Use of the comma

She is intelligent, not pretty.

The comma is used to separate several adjectives, as in the following example:

Example: Use of the comma

The long, crowded, noisy street was a frightening place.

The comma is used to separate dates and years, towns and counties etc, as in the following example:

Example: Use of the comma

I was born on 19 January, 1980.

The colon

The colon is used to introduce an idea that is an explanation or continuation of the one that precedes the colon, and in this way, it invites the reader to go on, as in the following example:

Example: Use of the colon

You are left with only one option: persevere until you have mastered your academic writing.

There is one thing you need to know about good academic writing: it takes practice.

Note: If the initial clause cannot stand alone and make complete sense, do *not* use a colon

The colon is also used to introduce a list, as in the following example:

Example: Use of the colon

The soup contained the following ingredients: carrots, potatoes and garlic.

Note: Note that there is no comma before the word ‘and’ near the end of the list.

The colon can also be used after a clause to introduce quoted material, as in the following example:

Example: Use of the colon

The most memorable movie quote is: ‘Frankly, my dear, I don’t give a damn.’

A colon can be used to add emphasis to an idea, as in the following example:

Example: Use of the colon

The one thing students cannot do without: good academic writing skills

Note: The sentence can also be written as: One thing students cannot do without is good academic

writing skills.

The semi-colon

The semicolon [;] is used to link independent clauses not joined by a co-ordinating conjunction, such as ‘and’ or ‘but’. Semicolons should join only independent clauses that are closely related in meaning, as in the following examples:

Example: Use of the semi-colon

Abdominal exercises help prevent back pain; proper posture is also important.

The author made four recommendations; however, only one has been adopted so far.

Note: The word ‘however’ in a sentence is preceded by a semi-colon.

Do not use a semicolon to link a dependent clause to an independent clause, as in the following example:

Example: Use of the semi-colon

Incorrect

Incorrect: Although gaining the skills of effective writing takes time; the effort pays off in the long run.

Correct: Although gaining the skills of effective writing takes time, the effort pays off in the long run.

Note: A dependent clause is a clause that provides additional information about an independent clause

When using a semicolon to connect two clauses, it is very important that the two clauses are both independent. This means that each clause has to be able to stand alone and make complete sense without the other. If either clause cannot stand alone, a semi-colon *cannot* be used.

Tip

As a rule, use a semicolon only where a full stop can also be used.

Note: Remember, a semicolon is a weak period, *not* a strong comma.

The semi-colon can also be used when punctuating a list in which one or more of the elements in the list contain an internal comma, as in the following example:

Example: Use of the semi-colon

Example #1: Those attending today’s meeting were: Dr McNamara, UCD School of Nursing, Midwifery and Health Systems; Dr Caulfield, UCD School of Public Health, Physiotherapy and Population Science; Dr Flynn, UCD School of Electrical, Electronic and Communications Engineering School of Medicine and Medical Sciences, and Professor Boland, College Principal.

Example #2: An article written in *The Lady of the House* in December 1903 profiled the leading lady principals in girls’ schools at the turn of the century. Those profiled were Mrs Byers, Victoria College Belfast; Miss Deane, Strand House, Derry; Miss MacKillip, Victoria High School, Derry; Miss Marshall, Rochelle Cork; Miss Martin, High School Cork; Miss McElderry, Rutland School, Dublin; Miss Mulvany, Alexandra School Dublin; Miss Shillington, McArthur Hall, Belfast; Miss Wade, Morehampton House, Dublin; and Miss White, Alexandra College Dublin.

Note: Note the use of the colon to set up the list in Example #1.

The apostrophe (')

The apostrophe is used in a number of cases, as follows:

It is used in contracted words to indicate that a letter or letters has been removed, as in the following examples:

Example: Use of the apostrophe

he's (for he is), I'm (for I am), don't (for do not)

It is used to show possession, as in the following example

Example: Use of the apostrophe

Example #1: The student's essay was well written

Example #2: The students' essays were well written

Note: Note the position of the apostrophe for singular (example #1) and plural (example #2) nouns

If the plural noun does not end with the letter 's' (e.g. women, people), the addition of an apostrophe before the 's' shows possession, as in the following examples: The women's movement, the people's health.

Tip

A common mistake is to place the apostrophe in a plural noun that is not in the possessive case.

Typical examples of this mistake include: CD's half price, Christmas tree's for sale.

Avoid this mistake!

Tip

Avoid confusing **it's** and **its**

It's is a contraction of the words 'it' and 'is', as in: **It's** a lovely day.

Its denotes possession, as in: Madrid is famous for **its** art galleries.

The hyphen (-)

The hyphen is a widely-used punctuation mark. Note the hyphen's use in the previous sentence to combine the words 'widely' and 'used', to form an adjective for the noun punctuation mark. The hyphen is generally used to join two words (e.g. decision-making) and to separate syllables of words (hyper-sensitive). Here is an example of its use to combine words:

Example: Use of the hyphen

Example without a hyphen: She kissed him good night.

Example with a hyphen: She gave him a good-night kiss.

Hyphen

Other examples of the hyphen include: man-eating tiger, one-way traffic, self-directed learning, decision-making process, nineteenth-century history.

Tip

There is no hyphen in the following sentence: 'In the nineteenth century, urban sanitation was generally very poor.'

Hyphen

There is a hyphen in the following sentence: Nineteenth-century urban sanitation was generally very poor.

Note: When ‘nineteenth’ and ‘century’ are combined to make an adjective, as in the second example, then a hyphen is inserted.

The hyphen should also be used in all words consisting of *self* when combined with a noun, as in the following examples: self-expression, self-confidence, self-disclosure, self-esteem.

The hyphen can be used when combining words like pre and hospital, as in ‘pre-hospital delay’, ‘pre-hospital admission’, ‘pre-hospital discharge’).

The Dash (–) and (—)

The dash is longer than a hyphen. There are two types of dashes: the **en-dash** [–] (same width as a letter **n**), while the **em-dash** [—] (same width as the letter **m**). It is important to know when to use the en-dash. It is used in the following situations:

To indicate the space between dates in a chronological range

To indicate the space between pages in a range of page numbers

Example: Use of the en-dash

En-dash

Example #1 for dates: The Second World War, 1939–1945.

Example #2 for page numbers: pages 12–13.

Note: Do not use the hyphen to separate dates or to separate page numbers; instead use the en-dash [–], as in the following examples: 1950–1960; pages 12–13.

Tip

To insert the **en-dash** [–] click on ‘Insert’, then click on ‘Symbol...’ then click in the ‘Special Characters’ tab and select the dash you require.

Use of language: Tense

When to use present tense:

Use the present tense when writing about the topic of the essay, including what is generally known about the topic, i.e. what is public knowledge or research-based knowledge, as in the following example:

Example: Use of the present tense

Example #1: Negative attitudes toward older people and a lack of knowledge about ageing combine to form ‘an extremely pessimistic picture of older adults and the ageing process’ (Bonnesen and Burgess, 2004, p. 125).

Verb in present the tense

Verb in the present tense

Example #2: Two of every three emergency medical admissions to Irish hospitals are for acute exacerbations of a chronic disease (Health Service Executive, 2008).

Tip

Use the present tense when writing the introduction to an essay, as in the following example:

This essay **examines** the role of play in the care of hospitalised children and **discusses** the role of the nurse in facilitating play among hospitalised children.

When to use past tense

Use the past tense when writing a literature review, particularly when reporting the findings from other research studies (example #1) and when writing on the history and trends in a field of study (example #2), or when reporting on the methods used in a research study (example #3).

Example: Use of the past tense

Verb in the past tense

Example #1: One Irish study reported that older people accounted for over 17 per cent of all attendances at Dublin hospitals (Health Service Executive, 2008).

Examples #2: In the nineteenth century, those seeking medical relief in the Dublin hospitals were the urban poor, including labourers, tradesmen and servants (Crawford, 1999).

Example #3: A non-probability sample of 307 older people attending the emergency departments of two hospitals in the city of Dublin was recruited.

When to use the future tense?

Use the future tense when writing a research proposal (example #1) and when writing an application for ethical approval (example #2). It is not usual for undergraduate students and for most taught graduate students to write in the future tense.

Verb in the future tense

Example: Use of the future tense

Example #1: Participants will be invited by e-mail to complete the questionnaires online using Survey Monkey.

Example #2: All focus group participants will be asked to give written informed consent prior to



participating in the focus group and no names of individuals or their organisation will be recorded during the focus group or identified in the report, and all data will be stored securely at then UCD Nursing & Midwifery Research Unit.

Main parts of an essay

The introduction:

The introduction should contain:

- A short general statement about the topic of the essay
- A short statement about why the topic is important
- A short statement about the scope of the essay
- A sentence or two on the structure of the essay
- A sentence or two on what will be the main argument or position taken in the essay

Main body: Sections and paragraphs

Structure the main body of the essay into major sections using headings.

Structure each section using paragraphs. Paragraphs are a collection of related sentences dealing with a single topic or idea. A well constructed paragraph contains sentences that are logically arranged and flow smoothly. A well constructed paragraph helps the writer stay on track and assists the reader to follow the ideas and line of discussion. The basic rule of thumb is to keep one idea to one paragraph.

The main body of the essay should follow a clear and logical structure, setting out the main points in step-by-step sequence. Where appropriate, definitions of terms and concepts should be provided, and these often appear in the early part of the main body. The discussion informs the reader about what is known on the topic and it the main argument that is being made in the essay, supported by evidence from other sources (referred to as ‘the literature’). The discussion should be balanced and unbiased, reflecting the range of perspectives that inform the topic.

Conclusion

The conclusion is used to:

- Restate the overall statement about the topic or aim of the essay that was given in the introduction
- Evaluate how and to what extent the evidence that was presented supported that statement or aim
- Indicate what other aspects might be considered and/or suggest what may happen in the future

Sources: References

The essay should be supported by sources. The sources used to inform the essay are indicated by using citations. Any resource that has been reviewed by one or more experts (peers) in a particular field is considered the most credible source (books, journal articles). Sources with low credibility are generally those not reviewed by an editor, publisher, or expert in the field. These include authorless papers, editorials, personal blogs, subjective reports (i.e. the author fails to deliver both sides of the argument) and websites. So every effort should be made to establish the credibility of sources and to avoid sources that are not reliable.

Sources FAQs

What is the difference between a reference list and a bibliography?

A reference list includes only the sources that have been included in the text of the assignment. A bibliography includes all sources used to gather information for the essay, some of which are not directly included in the text.

How often must I reference?

Every time you use other people's ideas you must acknowledge the source of information.

Should I use quotations or paraphrase the information?

Quotations should be used only when the exact words are essential to convey the meaning or the information; this may occur when an idea is expressed in a particularly eloquent or compelling manner. In all other cases use your own words and paraphrase. Whichever means is used be sure to include the citation (reference).

Should I include page numbers in my in-text reference?

If what you have written comes from a specific page or pages in the source, then definitely include a page number.

If all the ideas from a paragraph came from the one source how do I show that?

Put the reference at the end of the paragraph.

What do I do if every source I read is saying the same thing about the topic?

Try to find the original source of the idea and if this is not possible use the oldest reference. However, keep in mind that *common* knowledge that has existed for a long time does not need a reference (e.g. Darwin sailed on the Beagle, Nightingale took part in the Crimean War). These do not require a reference as they represent undisputed knowledge.

What if I write a summary that has been based on a number of different sources?

Cite all of the sources used and list them in chronological order in the text.

What if a book was reprinted several times? Which date do I use?

Use the publication date of the book that *you* used because information is often updated and may be different from one edition to the next.



Some words, phrases and expressions to avoid

Avoid phrases and expressions like these:	Use these instead:
Unfortunately, interestingly This was an interesting report because ...	This report is noteworthy, because it
Weiss (1973) would define loneliness as ...	Weiss (1973) defines loneliness as ...
A huge increase A massive rise	A very large increase
The research looked at loneliness among older people in Ireland	The study examined loneliness among older people in Ireland
In my opinion ... I believe ... The author believes that ... The author would argue ...	Simply make the statement that you wish to make (e.g. Some older people are vulnerable to social isolation)
The author will discuss anxiety and depression.	This essay discusses anxiety and depression
Avoid labelling expressions like: Patients suffering from anxiety The chronically anxious	Patients experiencing anxiety People with chronic anxiety
Avoid meaningless phrases like: In recent times; as society progressed; since ancient times; since Biblical times; One hundred per cent of the time	Use more precise phrases like: Since the late 1990s ... For over two millennia ... Most of the time
The group is comprised of...	The group comprises... or The group is composed of...

Some words that get confused

Affect: a verb meaning to have an influence on	Effect: is a noun meaning a cause of change brought about by an agent. Effect: a verb meaning to make something happen
Uninterested: to find something boring or dull.	Disinterested: impartial
Comprise: a verb meaning to consist of or be composed of.	Compose: to make up the constituent parts of.
‘Historic’: means having importance in or influence on history.	Historical: means ‘of or relating to the character of history.’
‘Complement’: to complete, make whole or bring to perfection.	‘Compliment’: an expression of praise, admiration or congratulation.
‘Advice’ is the noun.	‘Advise’ is the verb.
Your: means belonging to you.	You’re: the contracted form of ‘you are’.
‘Dependent’: relying on or requiring the aid of another.	‘Dependant’: one who relies on another especially for financial support
‘Council’: an assembly or collection of persons.	‘Counsel’: to give advice.



UCD School of
Nursing, Midwifery
and Health Systems