



# Academic Writing Online Module

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# Academic Writing Module - Introduction



Transcript to the [video](#).

Academic writing is one of the most important skills at university. This module takes you through each step of the writing process.

By the end of the module, you will:

- have an approach to develop your academic writing ability
- understand the difference between academic writing and non-academic writing
- consider the major steps in the writing process
- discover the importance of analysing the essay question
- develop your ability to brainstorm and create an argument
- use that argument to create topic sentences and outline a piece of academic writing
- practice proofreading and editing.

This module presents the academic writing process in easy-to-manage chunks.

You can stop and come back to it at any point.

# Non-academic vs academic language



Transcript to the [video](#).

Academic writing has a formal written tone and uses good grammar and spelling.

For example, you may text your friend: [Wanna go 2 the flicks 2nite?]  
or even just [Movie?].

Written in a formal tone, this would be: [Would you like to go to a movie this evening?].

While the ideas in academic writing should be straight forward, their expression is often presented in an indirect way. This is referred to as hedging.

For example, instead of writing “This proves that climate change is a hoax” in academic writing you might write “This supports the idea that climate change may not be a threat.” The words highlighted are hedging expressions [highlight on support and may not be] to show that you realise ‘climate change’ is a complex topic with no single right answer.

Further, ideas that you write in an academic essay are supported by research. So in the example earlier, you potentially would write: “Daca (2020) found that in the past temperature changes have regularly occurred in 300 year cycles. This supports the idea that climate change may not be a threat.”

Finally, academic writing has a formal structure. It should start with an introduction where you formulate your main ideas, which are then elaborated in the body paragraphs and then ends in a conclusion paragraph.

# Essay writing process



Essay writing is not a linear process. Even though in the exercise there are five distinct steps, some of these steps can repeat itself as you work on refining your argument. As you do your research on the topic, you will also be adjusting your argument and perhaps the structure of your essay.



# Preparation work



## Transcript to the [video](#).

Before you start writing, there are a few things you need to have a clear understanding of.

First, read the question. Make sure you understand what you are being asked to write about.

Then, check the marking criteria or the rubric. This usually has more information about what you are expected to cover in your essay.

Think about the weighting of the marks allocation. This will help you decide how much emphasis you need to put in each part of your essay.

After that, check the course learning objectives (CLOs). How does this assignment fit into the CLOs?

Then, check the assignment instructions on Blackboard. This will tell you where and how to submit your essay, and also other essay question options if any.

Check any required/recommended readings that may be relevant. The required or recommended readings will be the best place to start when brainstorming ideas for your essay.

Finally, check the lecture notes/slides on the topic. These may contain some hints or examples.

# Analysing the question



Transcript to the [video](#).

The four-step approach is a method to help you understand your essay question.

## **Step 1:**

Find the instruction word or words. The Instruction word handout lists the most common ones, along with a definition.

## **Step 2:**

Find the topic. The topic will be the general subject of the assignment question.

## **Step 3:**

Paraphrase the question. Think about different ways you can reword the question or turn the instructions into a series of questions (why, what, how? etc).

Paraphrasing the requirements in your own words helps you better understand what you are expected to write about.

## **Step 4:**

Find the limits or aspects you need to pay particular attention to.

Limits can be length (for example, 1500 words max), time period (for example, 'during the past decade'), or also specific areas of the topic (but not others).

Try this four-step approach with your essay question.

# Analysing the question

## Instruction words

The following words are often used in assignment and exam questions. Definitions are provided to help you understand the questions set by your lecturer, and how you are expected to answer them.

<b>Account for</b>	Give reasons for something.
<b>Analyse</b>	Take apart. Describe the different parts of the subject, how they inter-relate and contribute to the whole.
<b>Argue</b>	Give reasons or facts for and against an issue; try to prove by giving reasons or evidence for and against.
<b>Assess</b>	Briefly analyse, then make a careful judgement of the worth of something (eg. a theory) in the light of its truth, usefulness, etc. Give supporting evidence. You might include your opinion to a lesser extent.
<b>Compare</b>	Look for similarities, though differences may be mentioned, and come to a conclusion.
<b>Contrast</b>	Look for differences, though similarities may be mentioned, and come to a conclusion.
<b>Critique</b> <b>(also:</b> <b>Criticise</b> <b>Critically</b> <b>analyse</b>	Express your judgement about a subject. Analyse the subject and describe to what extent it is supported by evidence. In a lengthy assignment you might also analyse alternative ideas and describe the extent to which evidence supports them, and make a comparison.



<b>Define</b>	Give concise, clear meanings. Show that the distinctions implied in the definition are necessary to distinguish this particular item from all others in that topic/area.
<b>Describe</b>	Give a detailed account of something.
<b>Discuss</b>	Investigate or examine a subject. Present a point of view after considering both sides of an issue or question. Your point of view should be supported by evidence.
<b>Enumerate</b>	List the points required one by one, concisely.
<b>Evaluate</b>	Present a careful judgement of the problem, stressing both advantages and limitations. Evaluation implies evidence-based argument and, sometimes, personal judgement.
<b>Explain</b>	Clarify and interpret the material you present. State the 'how' and 'why', the results, and, where possible, causes.
<b>Explore</b>	Examine by working through systematically
<b>Illustrate</b>	Explain or clarify your answer by using specific examples or concepts. Sometimes you may do this by using a visual representation such as a figure, picture, diagram, graph, or drawing.
<b>Interpret</b>	Express the meaning of, translate, exemplify (give examples of), solve, or comment upon the subject. Usually you will give your judgement or reaction to the problem, but always make use of evidence.

<b>Justify</b>	Give evidence which supports an argument or idea. Show why decisions or arguments were made and consider objections that others may make.
<b>Outline</b>	Give the main features or general principles of a subject. Emphasise structure and arrangement. Do not include minor details.
<b>Prove</b>	Show whether something is true or false. Establish something with certainty by evaluating and giving experimental evidence or by logical reasoning.
<b>Relate</b>	Emphasise connections and associations in descriptive form, or by a narrative which shows how things are connected to each other.
<b>Review</b>	Analyse the major points of the subject in organised sequence and briefly comment on them.
<b>State</b>	Present in brief, clear form.
<b>Summarise</b>	Give the main facts in shortened form. Do not include details and examples.
<b>Trace</b>	Follow the development or history of a topic step by step from some point of origin.

## How, what, and why

**How, what,** and **why** are often used in academic assignment questions. It is not possible to list all the ways in which they can be used but below are some of the most common meanings.

### **How**

Describe a process. You usually need to identify the main points. Support your description of the process and main points with evidence. You often use examples as part of your evidence.

### **What**

State and describe the main features of a topic, or event. Support your statements about the main features with evidence related to the subject.

### **Why**

Give the reasons for some event, process or fact. Support the reasons with evidence.

# Brainstorming and creating an argument



After you analyse your essay question, you can start brainstorming for ideas and create your argument. Sometimes it is useful to list all of the ideas you have on a sticky note (one idea per sticky note). Then you can start categorising your ideas by moving the sticky notes around; much like in the exercise in this section.

# Starting to research

When you've settled on the ideas for your essay. You can start thinking about what you already know about the topic, for example from your previous knowledge or from lectures. In some cases you can already start writing a rough first draft for your essay. Writing a rough first draft serves a couple of purposes: first, you have broken the blank paper/blank screen syndrome and feel a sense of achievement. Most importantly though, by writing a rough first draft you may then notice which areas you need to do more research on. When you recognise the gap in your knowledge, it is easier to search for an answer through doing a library catalogue search or skim reading the textbook to look for an answer. Either way, make sure you keep good notes of the sources you use because you will need these later to go back to the original text and to reference your ideas.



# Gathering and processing information

As you begin researching, you will be surprised at the amount of information at your fingertips. However, this doesn't mean that all of the information is accurate. It's important to consider the source of the information to determine if it is reliable or not. Then, you will also need to know whether to acknowledge your sources.

## **A note about Wikipedia**

Wikipedia is a great tool to learn about the basics of most topics. By all means, use this as a starting point to familiarise yourself with some key ideas or terminology. However, do not use it as a resource for your essay. Wikipedia is open source, which means anybody can go in and edit the information on it. Wikipedia itself says that "Wikipedia is not a reliable source." (Read the whole Wikipedia article about this: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Academic\\_use](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Academic_use))

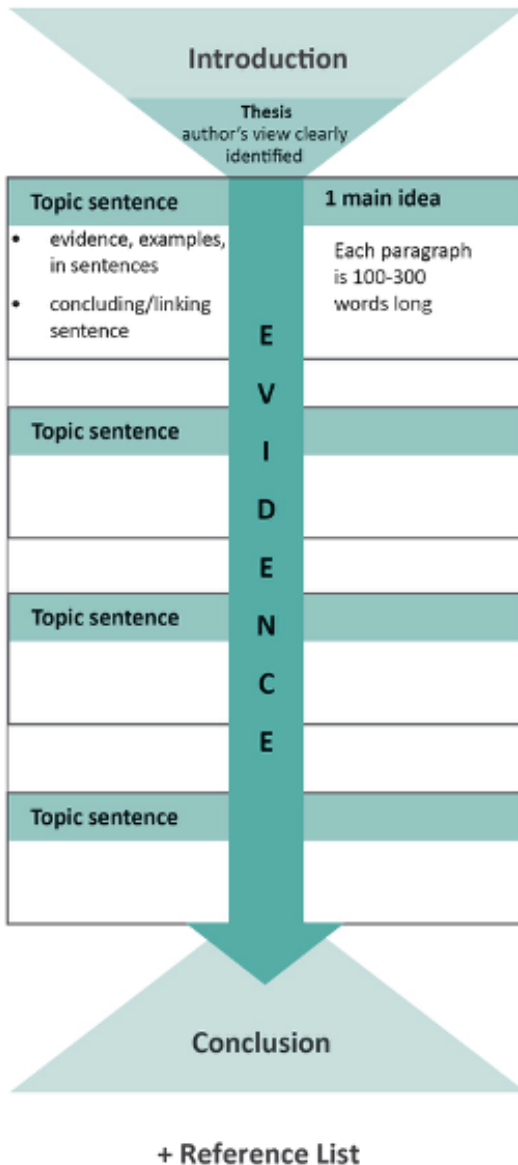
## **A note about plagiarism**

Plagiarism literally means 'stealing' someone else's intellectual property. Most students probably don't do it deliberately, but if it's difficult to understand what you are reading, or you haven't got time to express the information in your own words, you may be tempted to just copy a passage straight from a book or download material from the Internet.

To avoid plagiarising, you need to appropriately cite the source of the ideas you present in your writing. However, just citing other people's ideas still doesn't show whether you've understood the material, or how it relates to what you want to say. The best essays use information as a way of demonstrating your understanding of the topic, and also uses a range of sources (arguments for and against an issue, studies from different countries, periods, theoretical perspectives, etc.).

# Essay structure

University essays tend to follow a set structure. Once you've learnt the structure, you should find it easier to respond to the essay topic, to plan and write essays, and to develop your academic argument.



## **Introduction** (10% of total words)

- Gains the reader's attention
- Provides brief background material about the meaning and significance of the topic.  
Include definitions of keywords if necessary.
- Identifies the 'gap', problem or issue outlined in the question. Gives the reader some understanding of the order in which the ideas in the essay will develop.
- Clearly identifies the author's point of view in a thesis statement.

## **Body** of the essay (200-300 words per paragraph)

- Your argument is developed through paragraphs. Each paragraph should contain only one main idea. This main idea is stated in a topic sentence. at the beginning.
- Each paragraph supports the main idea by explaining the issue and providing evidence – e.g. quotes, statistics, facts, examples, or case studies.
- Decide how many points you wish to make and in what order. Link the paragraphs.
- Paragraphs should follow a logical sequence so that the essay flows towards the conclusion.

## **Conclusion** (10% of total words)

- Sum up your main points.
- Tie these back to the thesis statement.
- Possibly include some comments or recommendations.

Include your reference list or bibliography at the end of the essay.



# Revise, edit, proofread - Reporting verbs

It's easy to get used to only using one or two ways of introducing quotes or paraphrases. Here is a list of some other options. Using different introductions can add more specific meaning to what you're quoting, or why you're quoting it, as well as making your assignment more interesting to read.

Formal words		
According to ...	Emphasises	Questions
Adds	Establishes	Recommends
Affirms	Explains	Refers to
Agrees	Expresses	Refutes
Analyses	Finds	Remarks
Argues	In ...'s opinion	Reports
Asserts	In ...'s view	Shows
Believes	Indicates	States
Challenges	Insists	Stresses
Claims	Maintains	Suggests
Clarifies	Mentions	Supports
Comments	Notes	Theorises
Concludes	Outlines	Warns
Concurs	Insists	Writes
Considers	Points out	<b>Less Formal Words</b>
Contentends	Predicts	Feels
Describes	Presents	Thinks
Disagrees	Proposes	Says
Doubts	Proves	

**Note:** Don't say 'quotes' or 'cites' unless the author you are referring to is quoting another author. E.g. Boni (1999) quotes Tolan and Gorman-Smith's research, which shows that, "This small group ...commits 50—70 percent of all general crime."

## Examples of how to use reporting verbs (underlined):

Nualnetr (1996) points out the gap between what is widely known and what is still conjecture in the physiology of ageing. She warns, “It should be noted that ...”.

Roszak (1986) discusses the limitations...

Pascarelli & Quilter (1994) contend that it is “almost impossible to keep abreast of all the advances in medicine” (p.9).

Gibbs challenges those who assume they are fully aware of what they are communicating, asserting that this must never happen (cited in Donn & Schick, 1995) .

## Turning quotes into paraphrases:

It is better not to use too many quotes, but to paraphrase. This also allows you to use the bits of information you want in fewer words while leaving out parts that aren’t relevant for your use. You must take care not to change the meaning of what the original author wrote.

Here is the original text:

An unhealthy combination of stressors produces a dangerous chain reaction in the adrenal system. Stress can kill, as in the case of heart disease, but there are other unpleasant “diseases of stress”: high blood pressure, ulcer, and even cancer. Someone joked that the most effective form of stress management can be summed up in two words: Say no. (Pascarelli & Quilter, 1994, p.37)

Here are the different ways you can use the information in your essay:

- According to Pascarelli & Quilter (1994), too much stress can kill.
- Pascarelli & Quilter (1994) explain that some combinations of stressors can affect the adrenal system, leading to physical illnesses such as heart disease or even cancer.
- Pascarelli & Quilter (1994) assert that stress can even cause cancer.

Or sometimes you won’t need either an introductory verb or a page quote. In the following example, the “No” is too brief to be regarded as a quote, but the idea is not mine, so this is a paraphrase.

- An effective way of reducing stress can be to say, “No” (Pascarelli & Quilter, 1994).

## Linking phrases:

This is supported by ...

... amongst others, reports that ...

Another perspective is given by

In one paper...(Name, Year). However/Whereas in another...(Name, Year)

A similar ... is expressed by ...

On the other hand, ...

Similarly, ...

This is disproved by ...

However, contemporary research shows that ...(Name, Year)

However, contemporary opinion is that ... (Name,Year)

These findings are verified by ...

... (Author, Year) clarifies this: ...

Alternatively, ...

## Using linking phrases to compare findings:

- According to a number of authors (Essen-Gustavsson and Borges 1986, Jakobsson et al 1990, Larsson et al 1978, Lexell and Taylor 1991, Scelsi et al 1980, Tomonaga 1977), the effect of ageing on type I muscle fibres is insignificant when compared to the reduction in muscle size found occurring on type II fibres. This is supported by the similar findings of Aniansson et al (1986).
- Lexell et al (1983 and 1988) amongst others, reports that (claims that, suggests that, shows that ... etc) type I muscle fibres are less affected by ageing than are type II fibres which show a comparatively significant reduction in muscle fibre size with increasing age.
- Theories of adult learning (e.g., Cross, Knowles, Rogers) and literacy (e.g., Sticht ) are more likely to provide an appropriate framework for second language learning compared to those concerned with child development (e.g., Bruner, Piaget ).
- Behavioral theories (e.g., Hull, Skinner, Thorndike) argue that association, reinforcement, and imitation are the primary factors in the acquisition of language. However, cognitive theories (e.g., Ausubel, Landa, Schank) suggest that schema, rule structures, and meaning are the distinctive characteristic of language learning.

# Revise, edit, proofread - Editing checklist

## First, examine the whole:

- ✓ I have answered every part of the question
- ✓ I have answered the question explicitly/clearly
- ✓ I emphasised key words from the question in the introduction, body and conclusion
- ✓ My argument is strong and clear
- ✓ My assignment is well-organised and follows the required structure
- ✓ My work makes sense
- ✓ My assignment fits the word limit

## Second, focus on each section:

- ✓ My assignment is well-balanced in terms of the attention given to each part
- ✓ The different sections are easily recognisable
- ✓ The transitions between sections are smooth

### **Third, focus on individual paragraphs:**

- ✓ Each paragraph is on one topic
- ✓ Each paragraph opens with a topic sentence
- ✓ Sentences are in the right order
- ✓ Paragraph breaks are in the right place
- ✓ Each paragraph links to the next
- ✓ Every paragraph contributes to answering the question

### **Finally, examine each sentence:**

- ✓ Each sentence is complete and makes sense
- ✓ The meaning of each sentence is clear
- ✓ The grammar is correct: each subject and verb agree, and tenses are correct.
- ✓ Every word is spelled correctly
- ✓ All sources are used correctly and referencing details are correctly cited
- ✓ My list of references are accurate

# Academic Writing Module - Conclusion



Transcript to the [video](#).

Here are some important points to keep in mind as you apply what you have learned from this module to your own writing.

Academic writing is a process. It won't happen overnight which is why you will need to enough time to go through the whole process. As a process, it is not linear. You would rarely start with writing the introduction and continue straight through to the conclusion. You need to be prepared to draft and revise and cut and paste—until you are satisfied you have answered the question to the best of your ability.

Do not underestimate the part of the writing process that happens



BEFORE you start writing: analysing the question. Abraham Lincoln was quoted as saying “Give me six hours to chop down a tree and I will spend the first four sharpening the axe.” Time spent preparing and thinking about your ideas are just as important as the actual writing time.

The method introduced in this module is only one method for composing a piece of academic writing. Monitor your own progress and adjust as necessary.

Thank you for following this module. If you have any questions, please don't hesitate to contact us. Our contact details are below. All the best!

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## **Academic Writing Online Module**

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