



Academic Writing for Postgraduates

A training manual to assist postgraduates during their dissertation writing process

ACADEMIC WRITING FOR POSTGRADUATES

Introduction

Academic writing styles differ according to the rules and conventions of the different disciplines. Though each discipline may have elements unique to a particular field of study, one thing remains constant, everything presented in writing must be written to high academic standards. Academic writing at postgraduate level is not about testing your knowledge, but about building on what already exists. Your writing should not just comment, repeat, duplicate or criticise what is out there, but it should contribute to the existing body of knowledge.

A postgraduate thesis needs to display knowledge and understanding beyond undergraduate level and should also demonstrate a level of scope and depth beyond that taught within a classroom setting. A thesis must be presented in an appropriate academic style and format to ensure that the exact aims of the thesis are met. Academic style does not just refer to the clarity of expression, grammar, use of citation and referencing, but relates to a clearly-structured approach to the justification and validation of facts, theories and opinions presented to form a precise argument.

Language plays a key role in ensuring that your thesis is presented in a manner that will produce the highest possible results. In this short course we will address issues pertaining to writing, paying particular attention to language.

At the end of this course you will be able to:

- **read through your document for cohesion and coherence;**
- **use punctuation in appropriate places;**
- **do away with unnecessary words and excessive use of jargon;**
- **edit your document to ensure that paragraphs are linked and sentences make sense and**
- **present a concisely-written document which is clearly organised.**

Ice Breaker: Freewrite Exercise

Write an entry in your academic reflective journal detailing your first encounter with the university library. (The encounter can be fictitious.)

10 minutes to complete exercise.

Note: All participants are to bring an excerpt from their research paper or any other piece of their own academic writing to be used towards the end of the workshop - no longer than one page.

An Overview

Academic writing underpins all aspects of teaching and learning at university level. It describes a wide range of activities, such as: reading, note-taking, researching, planning, structuring, writing, revising, referencing and editing. Nothing affects a student's academic prospects more than their ability to understand contexts and subject matters and produce concisely-written documents that indicate a depth of insight and research.

Genres of Academic Writing

- Essays
- Research writing
- Reports

Features of Academic Writing

1. It is formal.

A. Formal writing does not use contractions, slang or colloquialism.
For example, aren't vs are not, won't vs will not.

- Change the phrases/sentences below to formal English:

- I. Isn't this the English lecturer?
- II. It'll be completed next week.
- III. They've received the money sent by the Dean.
- IV. These students can't write well in German.

B. Formal writing employs the passive voice more than the active voice, though in some science disciplines, students are often required to write using the active voice.

C. Vocabulary

Academic writing uses formal grammar.

Match the formal phrases in the boxes on the right with the informal phrases on the left.

Informal	Formal
1. You may ask...	It is essential that all parties...
2. Everyone must...	The current situation requires action from all citizens

3.It's high time we all did the right thing	Students learn in different ways
4.Students have their own styles of learning	One may ask...
5.We can't see or touch the goods	This essay discusses...
6. In my essay I'd like to say...	Goods cannot be seen or touched

2. It is impersonal and objective

The general rule of academic writing is not to include yourself in the writing or address the reader directly.

This means you should avoid the use of personal pronouns (I, we, our) and also avoid using the second person pronoun (you) – instead use the third person unless otherwise stipulated in your programme.

3. It is cautious or tentative.

When you write, you should use tentative rather than assertive language.

- I. Choose words such as *appears to* and *seems to* instead of *it is* – unless you have facts to back up your assertions. E.g. this appears to be the biggest concern of the residents.
- II. Use *may* and *might* e.g. It may be that the residents are not aware of the free water distributed every Saturday. The result might force the government to make some changes.

4. It references others' work

Plagiarism is a crime! You must reference sources of information used in your work.

I: The Basics

Example 1

The concept of African Time stems from the fact that more often than not Africans approach life in a more leisurely manner than Westerners. Placing all Africans under the same umbrella is, however, wrong as not all people have the same perspective of life. The apparent disregard for time in the African context has garnered much criticism from the rest of the world. It is important to note that the purpose of this paper is to identify and address myths surrounding the African and time, furthermore this paper seeks to identify the causes of "the African" Time concept, paying particular attention to time keeping in the corporate world. The generalisation that all Africans are bad time keepers has perpetuated the global attitude evident when dealing with Africans.

1. Structure

You are expected to express yourself in a clear, accurate, objective and coherent manner, using a layout that is approved and appropriate for academic documents.

Most, if not all, pieces of writing, regardless of their length, have:

- an introduction;
- a main body and
- a conclusion.

There may be several paragraphs/chapters in the main body, each of which adds to the argument being presented. The structure of your document must be clear, with headings and subheadings for the different chapters and sections.

1a. Introduction

The introduction catches the reader's attention. **It should be structured as an inverted pyramid**, starting with a broad overview, followed by the topic under discussion. This section provides brief background information and gives the reader a preview of what is to follow in the main body. It also has the thesis statement.

The introduction generally:

- highlights the purpose of the piece of writing;
- defines terms used in the document;
- gives an outline of how the piece is structured
- and indicates the writer's position in relation to the topic.

1b. Main Body

The main body presents the argument and is laid out in paragraphs, with points supported by research. The main body carries the bulk of the material so it is important to make sure that all sections are linked and that there is coherence. Before moving to a different section, always ensure that you state where you are and where you are going. This allows the reader to follow the progression of your argument.

For example, at the end of one chapter, indicate what chapter follows.

Body Paragraphs

In essence, a paragraph is a group of sentences which deal with an idea or an aspect of a topic guided by a topic sentence which often appears at the beginning of the paragraph. The paragraphs in the thesis must be related: all paragraphs must develop, add detail to, or otherwise relate to the thesis statement. There should always be a connection between the sentences in your paragraphs, and these should develop the main idea and move it to the next stage. Avoid using one or two sentences as paragraphs as one sentence does not make a paragraph.

1c. Conclusion

The conclusion summarises the thesis' main points and highlights the importance of the paper's findings whilst often making recommendations for relevant practitioners, based on the findings. A detailed reference list and appendix follow the conclusion.

ACTIVITY

1. Rewrite the piece read at the beginning of this section (Example 1).
2. Feedback Session – Each participant is to read their version of Example 1 and other members of the group are to give feedback.

II: The Writing Process

Example 2:

In the past financial year ending April 2015 it was clearly evident that the political situation in South Africa had a degenerative effect on our economy leading to exponential losses in investment portfolios with shareholders cashing in on their shares in calculated efforts to minimize the inevitable depreciation of the value of their shares due to the rapid drop of the South African Rand in the global economy. Furthermore it is manifestly clear that the intrinsic value of the Namibian Dollar cannot be separated from the Rand, thus the previous financial year strongly illuminated the fact that organisations in Namibia need to invest in systems that will enable efficient leveraging of resources to eventually enable the severing of the nation's dependency on the South African Rand's global position for the Namibian Dollar's validation. Past History has shown numerous times, over and over again that when a nation is not economically independent it always bends to the whims of those who are. It is obvious that South Africa is bringing Namibia down and future relations need to be approached cautiously.

Example 3:

The researcher finds out that most of the people in community X are not aware of the benefits of drinking water. 58% of the people surveyed said they do not drink tap water of the 58%, 35% buy bottled water and the rest hardly drink any water at all. Most of the respondents indicate that they drink at least 3 cups of tea or coffee during the day which serves almost as a replacement for water. The tea or coffee are not good substitutes for water as water has a particular function it perform in the human body. An additional 58% percent of the survey respondents said that they finds water tasteless, supported by a further 12%. The purpose of the research was to establish the water drinking habits of the X community and create awareness regarding the importance of drinking water. Maybe 2 litres a day would be sufficient. While the

survey was taking place, the researcher. The researcher took part in the distribution of water bottles to houses in the community. The water distribution two weeks and at the end the survey respondents from the community said that the water was not enough and a more sustainable solution needed to be sought out. Pure water is a problem in the community. 100% of the survey respondents said they would consider drinking more water if the government provided clean water, 5% said they would not be changing their water drinking habits. One of the respondents (Mr X) said they would rather be given juice or coke.

Debunking the academic writing myth

It is a myth that academic writing requires long sentences, complex expressions and excessive technical jargon. (With the exception of highly technical fields where jargon is expected and encouraged, however, even in these cases, the language must still be to academic standards)

An effective piece of writing is:

- concise;
- clearly organised;
- brief in its presentation and
- skilful in its use of jargon.

When writing:

- use short sentences where possible and plain language.
- avoid redundant use of words - using two or more words with the same meaning (e.g. past history, I went there personally, it cost \$10000 dollars)
- Avoid contracted verbs (e.g. don't, isn't, can't; instead use the full forms: do not, is not, and cannot.)
- Use consistent spelling conventions (either British English or American English e.g. generalise/generalize, behaviour/behavior – This depends on the university's regulations.)
- Use spell checker.

A. Passive Vs Active Voice

In English, all sentences are in either “active” or “passive” voice.

Active Voice

The active voice describes a sentence where the subject performs the action stated by the verb. It follows a clear **subject + verb + object** construct that's easy to read. In the active voice, the subject of the sentence **DOES** the action:

Active: Thomas Edison invented the light bulb in 1879

Passive Voice

With passive voice, the subject is no longer active, but is, instead, being acted upon by the verb. It follows a clear object + verb + subject construct that's easy to read. In the passive voice, the subject of the sentence **RECEIVES** the action.

Passive: The light bulb was invented by Thomas Edison in 1879.

Nowadays, academic disciplines such as Health and Applied Sciences have moved from the generally preferred passive voice in academic writing, opting for the active voice which is especially recommended for reflective papers. Disciplines such as those found in the Humanities tend to still prefer the passive voice.

Note: Active sentences tend to be shorter and more concise than passive sentences and they are often more effective when describing an action.

When to use passive voice

There are a number of cases where the passive voice is perfectly acceptable, such as when:

1. The 'doer' is unknown:
E.g. the cave paintings were made in the late 7th century. [We don't know who made them.]
2. The 'doer' is irrelevant:
E.g. an experimental solar power plant will be built in the Australian desert. [We are not interested in who is building it.]
3. You want to be vague about who is responsible:
E.g. Mistakes were made.
4. You are talking about a general truth:
E.g. Rules are made to be broken.
5. You want to emphasize the person or thing acted on. For example, it may be your main topic:
E.g. Insulin was first discovered in 1921 by researchers at the University of Toronto. It is still the only treatment available for diabetes.
6. You are writing in a scientific genre that traditionally relies on passive voice. Passive voice is often preferred in lab reports and scientific research papers, most notably in the Materials and Methods section:

E.g. the sodium hydroxide was dissolved in water. This solution was then titrated with hydrochloric acid.

Note: Over the past several years, there has been a movement within many science disciplines away from passive voice. Scientists often now prefer active voice in most parts of their published reports, even occasionally using the

subject “we” in the Materials and Methods section. It is important to follow the acceptable style stipulated by the University for your Discipline.

The problem with passive sentences

Passive sentences can be vague about who is responsible for the action where specifics might be required.

Academic writing often focuses on differences between the ideas of different researchers or between your own ideas and those of the researchers you are discussing. Too many passive sentences can create confusion:

Research has been done to discredit this theory. [Who did the research? You? Your professor? Another author?]

Note: Some students use passive sentences to hide holes in their research

Finally, passive sentences often sound wordy and indirect and can also tend to be monotonous. They require more from the reader and are generally longer than active sentences, which means you can have many words without covering much ground.

B. Cohesion and Coherence

Just having information is not enough. You need to ensure that your work makes sense:

- Cohesion: grammatical/lexical relationship between different parts of the same text
- Coherence: a logical arrangement of parts. In language this is the (semantic) relationship between different parts of the same text.

Do the ideas in your work relate to each other and does what you have written make sense to the reader?

C. Make the connection (between ideas, sentences and paragraphs)

When you make clear connections between your ideas, then your writing will be cohesive and coherent. You need to ask yourself the following questions:

1. Is each sentence complete and correct?

Subjects and verbs in sentences must agree with each other.

Take particular note of instances where the mother tongue (in cases where English is not the first language) might influence the way you write. Often with

second or third language English speakers, their everyday speech might have an adverse effect on writing.

E.g. *my hairs are growing* is grammatically wrong.

Hair is an uncountable noun which means it takes the singular form. The correct statement would be – *My hair is growing*.

E.g. *they gave us plenty of information to read through*.

Information is an uncountable noun so it takes the singular form. *They gave us plenty of information to read through*.

2. Are punctuation marks used correctly?

Do the punctuation marks make it easier or harder to understand the text?

If you have any doubt about punctuation, don't get creative, use as little as possible and write short, clear sentences. Some examples of punctuation marks are listed below.

- **Commas:** Commas are used to denote a pause in a sentence. If you find that you write in long sentences, check whether it might be better to create several short sentences replacing commas with full stops.

E.g. The Dean would like to see the heads of departments from Marketing, Research, Accounting, IT and HR.

- **Parentheses/Brackets:** are used to enclose additional information which may not be important or be of little importance (a side note).

E.g. Sossusvlei (with its dry landscape and scorching temperatures) is still one of the most popular tourist destinations in Namibia.

- **Italics:** are used for titles of books, plays, films etc, and some names such as house names.

E.g. The Ties that Bind was the first series to be produced locally.

- **Dashes/hyphens:** Hyphens are often used to connect prefixes to words or when forming compounds such as "*second-in-command*".
- **Colons:** The colon is used to introduce a list, an explanation, a long quotation or an idea. The colon also serves as a strong/definite pause within a sentence.

E.g. the church needs to buy the following items for the new building:
Microphones, speakers, window frames, chairs and fans.

- Semi-colons
 - a. The semi colon represents a pause that is longer than a comma, but shorter than a full stop, balancing two equally important, related ideas.
E.g. they practised for the games every day; they were not afraid of losing.
 - b. The semi-colon can also indicate opposite ideas.
E.g. In England the summers are very short; in Namibia it's summer almost all year round.
 - c. A semi-colon can also be used to mark off a series of phrases or clauses which contain commas.
E.g. The results of the research were very enlightening; 15% of respondents did not know the answer, 20% said maybe, 40% gave a definitive yes and the remainder said no.
 - d. A semi-colon can be replaced by a full stop and conjunctions; but, so, although, and.
E.g. they practised for the games every day so they were not afraid of losing.

3. Are the sentences too long, presenting too many ideas? (Should they be shortened?)

Short, clear sentences are usually more effective than those which are long and complex. Try to split up any overly long sentences into two or three shorter ones. Short sentences will help you avoid grammatical mistakes and make it easy for the reader to follow your line of argument. Each sentence that you write should make sense as an independent sentence. Avoid rambling sentences.

e.g. As part of the strategy to clamp down on illegal immigrants in the country, the ministry of Home affairs has created a department that deals primarily with chasing down immigrants with expired travel documents and dubious visa endorsements in the case of those with legal travel documents, this department was established following the recent increase in reports that immigrants were bribing their way into the country and the subsequent undercover operation that took place to identify the culprits within the ministry who were lining their pockets and allowing people to enter the country when they were not properly vetted or had no valid reasons to enter to be allowed entry.

4. Is there unnecessary jargon in the text?

Use the jargon of your subject area in an accurate and adequate manner. There is no need to litter your paper with jargon when it does not add value to your work. YOUR GOAL IS NOT TO IMPRESS THE EXAMINER/READER WITH YOUR KNOWLEDGE OF BIG WORDS; it is to show that you know and understand what you are talking about.

In law, medicine and financial services, jargon can be justifiable as often one is dealing with complex ideas, many originally written in Latin. In business, however, there is no such excuse.

e.g. *“This year we intend to maximise our earnings potential and ensure high ROI with best-in-class scalability levels”* essentially what’s being said here is, *“This year we intend to grow our business and make more money”*

e.g. *“With this collaborative agreement, our companies have a great opportunity for bubble gum-hard candy synergy”* essentially what’s being said here is, *“Together, we can create a product better than anything we could on our own.”*

(Examples taken from Brand Journalists 2016)

5. Are words used sparingly and efficiently? (Avoid verbosity.)

- Verbosity is using too many words when a few would do the job and often this goes hand in hand with excessive jargon.

E.g. *the emperor of the moving kingdom visualised the overcast sky, sensed the tempest in-the-make and sighed dejectedly. This man who found at his fingertips, making the mighty iron vessel slip on the huge blue mat of the nature, now felt like a helpless soul and ultimately allowed the vehicle of bout thousand travellers on board to dance to the whim of the waves.*

Simple meaning: *The captain lost control of the ship.*

(Example taken from Rajesh Chandra Pandey-hub pages)

- Avoid tautology/redundant use of words - using two or more words with the same meaning

E.g. *past history, I went there personally, it cost N\$10000 dollars*

Use consistent spelling conventions, either British English or American English e.g. *generalise/generalize*, *behaviour/behaviour* – this may depend on the university's regulations

6. Is everything included in the document necessary/adding value?

Repetition does not increase your chances of getting a higher mark. Do not use repetition and excess words to reach the required word count for your thesis, but rather invest time in more research and add information that will help your argument. When using words like aforementioned and phrases such as “as previously stated”, make sure you are not just repeating what was already stated but are linking ideas or points.

7. Are ideas linked and sentences connected?

Does each sentence connect with the sentence before and the one after it?
How are ideas linked throughout the document?

Useful linking devices:

The following linking words and phrases are useful in ensuring that work is coherent:

- a. When adding ideas:
And, also, as well as, besides, finally, first, furthermore, in addition, similarly
- b. When emphasising ideas:
Above all, after all, especially, indeed, in fact, in particular, it is true, most important.
- c. When illustrating ideas:
For example, for instance, in other words, in particular, namely, specifically, such as, that is
- d. Comparing ideas:
In the same way, similarly
- e. Contrasting ideas:
But, yet, at the same time, however, nevertheless, on the contrary, on the other hand, rather, conversely, in contrast
- f. Summarising ideas:
As has been mentioned, in summary, to summarise, in conclusion, to conclude, finally, in brief

ACTIVITY

1. Rewrite one of the examples given at the beginning of this section (Example 2 or 3) taking note of the lessons learnt.

2. In pairs, discuss what you've written and why you made the changes you made.
3. Volunteers to read for the group

C. References, footnotes and endnotes

Footnotes and endnotes are used for two main purposes:

- To elaborate a point made in the main text or to acknowledge a source in great detail and to give additional information which may not be exactly relevant in the main text, but may be useful for particular readers who may want to gain a full understanding of a context.

Though some fields may require detailed footnoting/end noting, in most cases the convention is to write with as much clarity in the main text as to require minimum or no footnoting.

All claims made within the paper must be supported by evidence and all sources must be acknowledged through references. Partial references are to be made within the text and the full reference clearly included in the reference list at the end of the thesis.

Do not pass off any work that is not yours as your own original work; this is plagiarism and it is the highest crime one can commit in academic writing, with severe consequences.

- APA reference guide

III: Revision, Editing and Proofreading

Revision and Editing

Editing will make your writing more precise and easier to understand. When editing, you critically read every sentence and ask yourself if it is clear and concise and if it is necessary. It is strongly advised to use a grammar resource and an approved English dictionary as you write.

Below are a number of steps to follow while you are revising and editing your thesis. These steps will ensure that your document is of high academic quality:

- a. Print out a hard copy of your paper. You will find that when you read from a hardcopy you are less likely to miss errors than if you just read from the computer.
- b. Read what you have written out aloud; this will help you hear where sentences don't sound right. When you stumble over a sentence, it means the sentence needs changing/editing for smoother reading.

- c. Rewrite where necessary: add words, rephrase, re-structure sentences until they are concise.
- d. Read every sentence and ask yourself if it is useful (does it support your thesis argument? If not remove it.)
- e. Though Spell Check and the grammar function on your computer are useful tools, remember that they may not find everything, so do not use them as your only tools for editing.
- f. Find the unnecessarily long words and ask yourself if they can be replaced by shorter, simpler words.
- g. As you read, check for coherence. Make sure that your sentences and paragraphs flow and your argument is clear.
- h. Cross-check all your references.
- i. Make sure that your font and letter size are consistent throughout the document. This is especially important to watch out for when you copy and paste direct quotations from a source.

ACTIVITY

Using the above tools, participants must work on the excerpts they were asked to bring from their own academic work.

Proofreading

Leave your paper for a couple of days or longer if possible and then go back to it. Proofreading means reading to check for superficial mistakes. Often a paper can be full of small errors that lead to a reduction in marks. It's important to proofread to eliminate any careless errors left in the editing process. Once again, print your edited paper and read through it with a pen in hand to mark any errors.

It is also advisable at this stage to employ a professional editor to read through your document. The editor is likely to see errors you would miss as they are reading your document with a "fresh" pair of eyes.

Differences between editing, proofreading and copyediting

Editing

When editing one:

- Checks and rewrites sentences and paragraphs for flow where necessary. The idea is to review a piece of text with the aim of improving its overall quality. This may include removing complete sentences and rewriting complete paragraphs.

- Makes the text clearer and easier to understand.

A good editor will correct any errors they come across in a document, but their main objective is to ensure the document makes sense (getting rid of fluff and clarifying any ambiguity).

Proofreading

As previously stated, proofreading focuses on correcting superficial errors. It is the process of examining the final draft of a document or text (after it has been edited) to ensure there are no errors in grammar, syntax (sentence structure), punctuation and formatting.

Proofreading also includes making sure that there is consistent use of either British or American English in the document.

Copyediting

To copyedit a document is to edit and proofread it, paying particular attention to the accepted style of an organisation.

NB: Copyediting ensures that a piece of text is consistent with an approved style.

ACTIVITY

1. Participants must exchange any one piece of writing from the workshop and proofread.
2. Feedback Session

IV: Common Mistakes in Academic Writing

1. Subject-Verb agreement

This is the most common problem in Namibian writing. If a subject is singular then its verb must also be singular; if the subject is plural then the verb must also be plural.

E.g. the list of items is on the desk vs the list of items are on the desk.

In this case the list is the subject so the verb must be singular.

2. Missing apostrophes.

When people use contractions, they often put the apostrophe in the wrong place or leave it out completely.

E.g. I will - I'll, cannot - can't, let us - let's vs I will – ill, cannot – can't, let us – lets.

Often people confuse possessive pronouns with contracted words.

E.g. Your with you're (you are) - Your supervisor is coming to give a talk on tardiness and you're expected to be there.

E.g. his with he's - My boss left his car keys in the office so he's going back to get them.

Possessive pronouns never need an apostrophe.

3. Wrong comma usage

The idea that you should place a comma anywhere you would pause when reading is wrong. The rules for commas have changed over the years, adapting to evolution in writing forms.

E.g. let's eat Susan implies something sinister. The correct statement should read; let's eat, Susan.

E.g. The workshop we attended, was interesting though, I wish it could have gone on longer. The correct sentence would be; the workshop we attended was interesting though I wish it could have gone on longer.

4. Confused and misused words

E.g. affect vs effect, their vs there and they're.

'Their' is a possessive pronoun indicating ownership; 'there' is a location and 'they're' is the abbreviated form of they are.

Affect is to influence or alter; effect is the result or outcome of a cause.

E.g. they're behaviour warrants a disciplinary hearing as it has affected other members of staff which will eventually have a negative effect on the company.

5. Abuse of words such as moreover, aforementioned, while, etc.

ACTIVITY

1. RECAP – Each participant is expected to pick one aspect of the workshop they found significant and give reasons for their choice.

2. Workshop Assessment- Participants are expected to complete a workshop assessment form.

Finally, *“**Good writing** is not purely about being technically correct and following conventions. It is also about robust form, completeness and coherence, excitement and originality, scholarship and insight.”* Dr Anne Murphy (Dublin Institute of Technology)