Alternative Format: Academic Writing Toolkit

Landing Page

Welcome and thank you for accessing this toolkit which has been designed to help support you with your academic skills development during your time at Edge Hill.

Click 'Get Started' to start the toolkit from the beginning or alternatively select the most relevant heading(s), from the contents below.

We recommend completing the sections in order, but you are welcome to work through this toolkit in the way that suits you best.

Accessibility

Our commitment to accessibility

As an Edge Hill student you are part of an incredibly diverse learning community. As part of our ongoing commitment to ensure an equitable and inclusive learning experience for all students, we have placed accessibility at the heart of UniSkills support, which enables all students to participate.

Alternative Formats

This is an alternative format for the Academic Writing toolkit.

Welcome from UniSkills

“Hello, we are the Student Engagement team – otherwise known as UniSkills! We are the people you’ll meet (in real life and online) through various support channels, as we help you develop your academic skills while studying at Edge Hill University. Later in the toolkit you will have the opportunity to explore our wider support**,** but this is your chance to find out more about the team”

Access the video below to hear more about UniSkills and how to use this toolkit from our friendly Student Advisor. Alternatively, you are welcome to access the transcript as a **Word version** or **PDF version.**

How this toolkit can help

Academic writing is distinguished it from normal writing in terms of style, tone**,** and content**.** Refining your academic writing skills is essential for achieving a strong submission.

Access this short video**,** featuring one of our friendly academic skills advisors, who will tell you more about why academic writing is important. Alternatively, you are welcome to access the transcript as a **Word version** or **PDF** version.

Top tip: Already received some assignment feedback or wish to jump to a specific word or phrase within this toolkit? You can click on the magnifying glass in the top left-hand corner of the navigation panel to access a search box, search for key terms and learn more about that skill. Depending on the device you are using to access the toolkit, and whether you are in portrait or landscape mode, you might need to click on the 3 lines '≡' in the top left-hand corner of your device to access the search box instead.

Toolkit objectives:

Upon completion of this toolkit, you will have developed the skills to:

- Support you to understand the genre conventions of different types of academic writing
- Enable you to identify an appropriate academic language, style and tone for academic writing
- Help you to understand how to plan and structure different types of academic writing
- Develop your confidence to build a critical and academically supported argument
- Provide strategies for successful editing and proofreading
- Highlight how you can access further help and support from the UniSkills team

Completing this toolkit also supports the following graduate attributes:

- Literacy
- Digital Literacy
- Planning and Organisation
- Communication

Your academic writing journey

We know that academic writing can at times feel daunting, with lots of new skills to learn, important guidance to follow and deadlines to meet. However, we also know that your writing skills will develop and flourish with practice. Think of your academic writing as a small seed which, when planted at the beginning of your course, will develop over time to become strong and resilient.

How your writing will develop at Edge Hill

In higher education, the levelness of academic writing evolves significantly, as you move between years.

Depending on your year of study, you will be expected to meet set standards (or levels) within your writing. This can cover the basics such as demonstrating a clear structure, through to more complicated requirements such as constructing critical and complex arguments. These levels differentiate what is expected from your writing as you progress through your course, and also help your tutors to assess your work.

This progression ensures that by the time students reach postgraduate studies, they are proficient in producing high-quality, rigorous, and impactful academic work. For students not continuing g into postgraduate study, these writing skills are transferable and beneficial to the workplace.

Note: Levelness is important, particularly when understanding how your written work is assessed. However, it's also important to note that not everybody will be at the expected level at the expected time. For many reasons, it's not always a linear path through the levels.

At Level 4, you will be introduced to the basics of academic writing, focusing on understanding structure, use of citations and referencing, and developing clear, concise arguments.

By Level 5, you are expected to engage more critically with sources, demonstrating deeper analysis and synthesis of information.

At Level 6, the complexity increases, requiring independent research, original thought, and the ability to construct sophisticated arguments.

Finally, at Level 7, academic writing demands a high degree of originality, critical evaluation, and contribution to existing knowledge, reflecting a mastery of the subject matter and advanced research skills.

Below is some helpful advice to help grow your understanding of academic writing.

You will make mistakes! They are even expected, particularly in those first few written assignments. Remember to learn from any mistakes made, the tutor feedback you receive will help you improve your academic writing.

Schedule your time! Give yourself plenty of time to complete your academic writing. Remember it's not just the writing itself, it's the preparation and research beforehand and the editing and proofreading at the end too. Create a plan or timetable, you will probably need more time than you originally envision.

Access support! This toolkit is just one of the many tools in place to help support you on your academic writing journey. If, during this academic writing toolkit, you still have questions or need more support with your academic writing - check out your UniSkills web pages- we're here to help.

Ready? Click 'continue' below to start your academic writing journey.

The basics: Common Types of Academic Writing

During your time at university, you may be asked to complete a variety of assessments, each requiring you to write differently. Academic writing can therefore cover a wide range of writing styles.

Types of writing

It's easy to think university assessments are mostly essays and exams, but there are many different types of assessment that you may be asked to submit.

Essay: Within an essay, you would discuss a particular topic/theme based on the academic reading you have undertaken first. A standard format would include an introduction, the main body of your argument, followed by a conclusion and reference list. Essays use formal language and are most commonly written in third person.

Exam: The depth and breadth of writing required in an exam may vary, and questions may need short answers or longer essay length responses. However, exams do usually require you to write in a more concise manner, whilst keeping to time constraints. Maintaining a clear focus, structure, and answering the question set is important when writing in exams.

Oral presentation: Whilst concise and not text heavy, an oral presentation should still be written formally and supported with relevant academic literature. Structure is key; ensuring the argument is logical and easy to follow for your audience. Images may help to illustrate your writing.

Literature review: A literature review may be a stand alone assignment, or form part of a larger piece of work such as a dissertation. It requires you to present an overview of relevant research in the field you are discussing. Relevant themes should be identified, along with any gaps in the literature and scope for future research.

Blog: Writing a blog allows you to demonstrate a more engaging and informal tone within your academic writing. Try to hook your reader in with a catchy title and snappy text. Blogs are often used to promote certain topics or ideas, and as such tend to read more like a story or opinion-piece, rather than a regular piece of academic writing. Visuals can also help to bring your blog to life, so don't be afraid to incorporate relevant images or videos.

Reflective log/ journal: A reflective log may form part of a larger assessment or be submitted as a standalone piece of work. Written in first person, it should describe an event or experience, followed by a personal reflection on how this made you feel or react. There should be opportunity to reflect on what you have learnt from this experience/event and what could be done differently/or improved upon in the future. Reflections should demonstrate critical thinking and be supported with relevant academic literature.

Report: Report writing requires a clear and organised structure; this usually includes an introduction, methodology, findings, analysis, conclusion and recommendations. Information should be clearly presented and may make use of graphs/charts (which may be included within an appendix). Reports should be written in a formal tone.

Portfolio: A portfolio usually consists of a variety of documents which are presented together as a collection. Each of these written parts may require different styles of writing (reflective, essay based, case study etc.).

Poster Presentation: Whilst poster presentations are mostly visual, relying on the use of images, diagrams and charts to communicate the topic being discussed, written text is still required. Academic writing on an academic poster may include-Title, Introduction, Aims or Objectives, Methods, Findings, Discussion, References. Text should be clear and concise; the use of headings and bullet points can help to structure the layout and retain focus.

Dissertation: Writing a dissertation takes careful planning over a much longer period of time. It may require you to undertake your own research, and will also involve critically analysing other research in that particular field. Structures can vary, but most will include an Introduction, Literature Review, Methodology, Results, Discussion, Conclusion and References.

Top Tip: The types of academic writing listed above isn't exhaustive, and you may therefore encounter other types of written assessment too. Always read your assignment guidance carefully to understand what type of academic writing you will be undertaking.

Styles of academic writing

Whichever type of academic writing you are undertaking, it is also important to consider the style of writing that is required.

Descriptive writing: Most tutors will tell you to avoid large sections of descriptive text in your writing. However, there will be times when you need to describe and/or explain information. Do try to limit how much of your writing is descriptive. During the editing process it is useful to check whether you are simply providing information or discussing it in a more critical manner.

Example of descriptive writing

Assignment title: Discuss the role of evidence-based practice (EBP) in nursing and its impact on patient care outcomes.

Evidence-based practice (EBP) in nursing entails integrating the best available evidence from research with clinical expertise and patient preferences to inform decision-making and enhance patient care outcomes (James, 2022). By utilising evidence-based guidelines and protocols, nurses can ensure that their interventions are grounded in scientific rigour and have been shown to be effective in improving patient outcomes (Lewis, 2021). This approach fosters a culture of continuous quality improvement and promotes patient safety by minimising variations in care delivery and reducing the risk of adverse events (Thompson et al., 2023).

How is this descriptive writing?

- Whilst academic sources are cited, they are used in a descriptive manner because they state what has been said, rather than the significance of what is being discussed.

- Questioning the impact, limitations and consequences of what is being discussed in the literature could demonstrate a greater level of analysis.

Read or listen further to see how this response develops.

Analytical writing: Your tutors want to see evidence of your analytical skills within your writing. This is often known as criticality. This is the ability to formulate an argument based on the academic reading you have undertaken (which is why wider academic reading is important to develop your writing skills). Think about the limitations, considerations or recommendations of what you are reading.

Example of analytical writing

Assignment title: Discuss the role of evidence-based practice (EBP) in nursing and its impact on patient care outcomes.

Evidence-based practice (EBP) in nursing is often lauded for its integration of research evidence, clinical expertise, and patient preferences to enhance patient care outcomes (James, 2022; Lewis, 2022; Thomas 2023). However, critical scrutiny reveals inherent complexities and limitations. The evidence landscape is potentially marred by methodological flaws and biases, undermining the reliability and applicability of research findings (Smith, 2022; Musa, 2023). Standardised guidelines may overlook individual patient needs and preferences, promoting a one-size-fits-all approach to care (Jones, 2021). Organisational barriers and resource constraints may hinder EBP implementation in practice (Singh, 2020; Olson, 2023). Additionally, an overemphasis on research evidence may marginalise nursing intuition and experiential knowledge, eroding professional autonomy (White, 2024). In conclusion, while EBP is advocated as a means to improve patient care, its limitations must be acknowledged and addressed to ensure its effective application in nursing practice.

How is this analytical writing?

- Notice how the student uses cautious language such as 'may' and 'potentially' to indicate that they are mindful of other possible perspectives.

- Compared to the previous descriptive writing example, this version shows greater synthesis of sources identifiable by the use of more than one source for the same point, demonstrating wider reading.

- This writing is more analytical, in that it doesn't just repeat what is being said but questions the literature by exploring limitations and biases. These are addressed, rather than the literature being accepted at face value.

Read or listen to the next section to see how a reflective response, based on your own experience might look.

Reflective writing: Depending on the course you are studying, you may be asked to write reflectively; discussing what you have experienced or how you felt. Students undertaking placements may therefore be asked to keep a reflective log or write a reflective assignment. It is important to remember that reflective writing should still follow formal guidelines, and that a critical reflection requires you to engage with academic literature to support your own reflections.

Example of reflective writing

Assignment title: In relation to your placement, critically reflect on the role of evidence-based practice (EBP) in nursing and its impact on patient care outcomes.

My placement experience has provided a nuanced perspective on the role of evidence-based practice (EBP) in nursing and its impact on patient care outcomes. While EBP is often lauded as a cornerstone of quality care, its practical application presents both opportunities and challenges that warrant critical reflection (Dupont, 2023; Chen, 2024). Throughout my placement, I witnessed first-hand the positive effects of EBP on patient care. By integrating research evidence, clinical expertise, and patient preferences, nurses can make informed decisions that optimise patient outcomes (Taylor, 2022; Goffin, 2023). Evidence-based guidelines and protocols serve as valuable tools for standardising care practices and promoting patient safety (Thompson et al., 2023). Moreover, the systematic approach of EBP fosters a culture of continuous quality improvement within healthcare organisations, driving positive change at both the individual and systemic levels (Brown, 2023). However, my experience also revealed barriers to the effective implementation of EBP in practice. Organisational constraints, such as limited resources and time pressures, can impede nurses' ability to access and utilise research evidence in their decision-making processes (Jones et al., 2022). Additionally, resistance to change from colleagues or administrators may hinder the adoption of evidence-based practices within

healthcare settings (Simpson et al., 2023). Furthermore, while EBP emphasises the importance of research evidence, it is essential to recognise the complementary role of nursing intuition and experiential knowledge in clinical decision-making (Williams, 2021).

How is this reflective writing?

- Writing is presented in both first and third person.

- Reference is made to the placement undertaken, and personal experiences.

- Literature is cited to support the reflections to present an awareness of the wider context.

Top Tip: Read over any previous assignments you have completed. Within your writing, can you easily determine where you have been descriptive, analytical or reflective? Using coloured highlighters to mark these different areas out can help you to identify sections of text which are too descriptive.

Critical writing

Regardless of the type or style of academic writing you are undertaking, it ultimately needs to demonstrate criticality. You can do this by:

1. Reading plenty of academic literature (e.g. textbooks and journal articles).
2. Building an assignment plan that is based on the reading you have undertaken.
3. Ensuring that your academic writing is supported by relevant literature and accompanying citations. Remember, it is your academic reading which helps you plan and evidence your academic writing.

The basics: Style and tone

Language, style and tone play a crucial role in academic writing.

Paying close attention to academic conventions will help you to ensure your ideas, insights and arguments are communicated well, fostering trust in the information you have presented.

Tone of voice and formality

Finding the right voice

Academic writing is concise, clear, formal and may use different voices. You might even be asked to use different voices depending on the type of academic writing you are carrying out. It's important to

note that the appropriateness of voice should always be checked with your tutor, as this can vary between disciplines.

First person voice: Use a first-person narrative voice when reflecting on your own personal experiences, a scenario or where there is a need to be subjective. You can use first-person pronouns, for example 'I', 'my' and 'me'.

Even when writing in the first person, you should strive to maintain a professional and scholarly tone, avoid overly subjective language, and provide evidence and support for your assertions and arguments.

The key is to use first-person pronouns purposefully to enhance the clarity, coherence, and effectiveness of your academic writing. Some examples are below:

'In my clinical practice, I have observed that regular exercise improves cardiovascular health.'

'My teaching philosophy emphasises active learning to foster critical thinking skills.'

'I believe that regular sleep patterns are essential for maintaining overall well-being.'

Third person voice: Writing in the third person means that you do not talk about or acknowledge yourself or your reader in your writing. Using the third person, enables an objective and considered view of your topic.

This kind of writing helps to reduce the possibility of any bias in your work and also demonstrates your research skills. Third-person writing is a style of writing that involves using pronouns such as 'he,' 'she,' 'it,' 'they' or refers to a group such as 'researchers' or 'NHS'. You will also find yourself referring to people by surname(s) in line with referencing conventions. Explore the examples below:

'Educators emphasise active learning to foster critical thinking skills. They...'

'Smith and Jones (2023) advocate for holistic approaches to mental health treatment.'

'Researchers found that regular sleep patterns are essential for maintaining overall well-being.'

Active voice versus passive voice: Active and passive voice are two different ways to structure sentences in English. Here's a quick overview of the differences:

Active Voice: The subject performs the action expressed by the verb.

Example:

The student studied the text.

The solicitor submitted the legal brief to the court last month.

Passive Voice: The subject receives the action expressed by the verb. The focus is on the action itself rather than the doer.

Example:

The text was studied by the student.

The legal brief was submitted to the court by the solicitor last month.

Passive voice sounds the most formal but for clarity and conciseness active voice can be more appropriate.

Avoiding informality

Academic writing typically requires a formal tone. Choose words and phrases that are appropriate for scholarly discourse. The Student Phrasebook: Vocabulary for Writing at University contains around 2,000 key academic words, with definitions and important word information given for over 1,000 of these. The words presented are appropriate for formal and clear writing at university level.

As a rule, you should avoid contractions, slang, and overly casual language in the form of idioms or clichés.

Activity: If you feel unclear about the definition of 'contraction', 'slang,' idiom' or 'cliché' then access an online dictionary to learn more.

Some examples:

Cliché: at the end of the day

Idiom: Every coin has two sides/ a double edged sword

Slang: Kids instead of using children

Contractions: can’t, won’t, I’m- these should be written out in full.

Being cautious

When you communicate in academic writing, it is important to be cautious in tone and style which means making vocabulary choices which avoid expressing absolute certainty and over generalisations. Hedging devices can support this.

Top Tip: Academic Phrasebank provides some really useful examples of how to use cautious language, so why not take a look?

The curriculum adjustments **may** lead to improvements in student performance.

The market analysis **suggests** potential growth opportunities.

The preliminary study findings **hint** at a possible link between diet and heart health.

The new teaching method will **possibly** enhance student engagement.

The proposed strategy offers **potential** cost-saving measures.

Maintaining an objective tone

Presenting arguments and evidence objectively without personal bias or emotional language contributes to the formal tone of your academic writing.

Here are some examples of objective and emotive statements:

Emotive: The catastrophic effects of deforestation on biodiversity left environmentalists deeply concerned.

Objective: The decline in polar bear habitats resulting from melting ice caps underscored the imperative for climate mitigation measures.

Emotive: The alarming rise in ocean acidity levels threatened marine ecosystems with irreversible damage.

Objective: The increase in ocean acidity levels posed a notable risk to the stability of marine ecosystems.

The basics: Clarity, conciseness and cohesion

Coherence, clarity, and conciseness are essential elements of effective academic writing. Together they contribute to the successful communication of ideas and to how well the reader engages with your argument.

Conciseness and clarity

In your academic writing it is important to be concise and clear so your writing can be understood. This helps your reader to quickly understand the points you are making.

Learn more below about vocabulary and grammar considerations.

Vocabulary tips for clarity and conciseness:

1. Be Precise:

Choose words that convey your intended meaning. Avoid vague or ambiguous language that could confuse your readers.

For example, instead of using 'good,' consider more specific terms like 'effective,' 'beneficial,' or 'advantageous.'

2. Be Direct:

This can help with your word count!

'It is essential that management come to a conclusion regarding the matter.'

Concise: 'Management must conclude the matter.'

3. Condense Phrases:

'Due to the fact that...'

Concise: 'Because...'

4. Limit Modifiers:

'The very important point to consider...'

Concise: 'The crucial point...'

5. Remove Unnecessary Words:

'At this point in time, it is not possible to predict with certainty.'

Concise: 'Currently, certainty cannot be predicted.'

Grammar tips for clarity and conciseness:

1. Use Active Voice:

Passive: 'It was determined by the researchers that the hypothesis could not be supported.'

Active: 'The researchers determined that the hypothesis lacked support.'

2. Combine Sentences and Ideas:

Separate: 'The study examined the effects of climate change. It focused on coastal regions.'

Combined: 'The study focused on examining the effects of climate change in coastal regions.'

3. Choose Strong Verbs:

Weak: 'Make a decision'

Strong: 'Decide’

4. Only include one main idea per sentence:

Weak: 'Disrupted fishing industries and loss of property value as well as various mitigation strategies such as building seawalls and implementing zoning regulations are profound...'

Strong: 'Disrupted fishing industries are one of the most profound socioeconomic impacts of climate change on coastal communities...'

5. Keep your sentences to a reasonable length:

Weak: 'The modern education system, which encompasses a wide array of stakeholders including students, teachers, parents, administrators, policymakers, and community members, is a complex network of interactions, policies, and practices that seeks to facilitate the holistic development of individuals by providing them with the necessary knowledge, skills, and competencies to thrive in a rapidly changing world.'

Strong: Effective education involves collaboration among students, teachers, parents, and policymakers to foster holistic development and equip individuals with the knowledge and skills needed to navigate today's dynamic world.'

Cohesion

Cohesion in academic writing refers to the logical flow and the connections between your sentences, paragraphs, and ideas. This is often known as signposting.

Some examples are provided below:

Listing signposts: Firstly, secondly, next, last, lastly

Reinforcement/ addition signposts: moreover, in addition, furthermore, also, additionally

Transition to a new point/ change direction signpost: however, in contrast, on the other hand, instead, turning now to, conversely, nevertheless.

Top Tip: Another useful tip is to use pronouns to add coherence to your writing and make it flow better. You can do this by referring back to ideas already mentioned in another sentence or paragraph.

For example, using pronouns, such as 'this', 'it', 'these', 'those' or 'their', to refer to the concept you are discussing can show you are continuing the same point.

Example: 'The researcher's attention to detail throughout the experimental procedure ensured accurate data collection and reliable results. This approach exemplifies their scientific approach which is necessary for producing credible findings in the field of biomedical research. Additionally, it underscores their commitment to maintaining methodological integrity and upholding the standards of scientific inquiry.'

Focus and planning

In academic writing, effective communication hinges on three key elements: planning, focus, and organisation.

Deconstructing the question

During your time at Edge Hill, you will encounter many different types of assignment questions and titles. Whilst each assignment question/ title might look unique, there are typical conventions and patterns you can expect. The following information provides strategies to deconstruct an assignment title/ question and gain the focus you need.

Step 1- Understand the topic and requirements

It sounds obvious, but make sure you read the question or title and then reread it several times.

Try to firstly establish the topic of the assignment. This is the main area that the assignment is about.

For example, the different topics are highlighted below:

Example 1: Critically examine the role of **Artificial Intelligence** in the promotion of events.

Example 2: Analyse the impact of **social media** on Adolescent Mental Health.

Example 3: Explore **sustainable urban development strategies** in the south of England.

Ensure you are clear on the word count and any formatting conventions such as spacing, font size and style and submission requirements.

Step 2- Understand the focus

What is the focus of the assignment? This is the aspect of the topic that you need to write about. The focus of these assignments are highlighted below:

Example 1: Critically examine the role of Artificial Intelligence in the **promotion of events**.

Example 2: Analyse the impact of social media on **adolescent mental health**.

Example 3: Explore sustainable urban development strategies in the **south of England**.

Sometimes there might be more than one part to an assignment question or title. For example:

Critically analyse sustainable urban development strategies in the **south of England** from an **environmental and socioeconomic perspective**

It can be a good idea to use a highlighter to identify each part of the question or title.

Step 3- Understand the instructional words

These are the key words (sometimes called directives), often placed at the start of the assignment question or title which give you direction and some insight into how you should present or structure your writing.

Again, you may find there is more than one of these key words and you should also expect these to vary between years as the expectations of your writing skill changes. Some examples of key words are highlighted below:

Example 1: **Critically examine** the role of Artificial Intelligence in the promotion of events.

Example 2: **Analyse** the impact of social media on adolescent mental health.

Example 3: **Explore** sustainable urban development strategies in the south of England.

You might notice, as you transition between years that the word 'critically' is added to any of the instructional assignment words. This signifies a deeper level of analysis, evaluation, or scrutiny. It implies a rigorous and thorough examination that goes beyond surface-level understanding and demonstrates sophisticated critical thinking skills and a more nuanced understanding of the subject matter.

Your Uniskills web pages house lots of further resources to support you to develop your critical thinking and writing skills.

Step 4-Check your learning outcomes

In addition to how well you have answered the question, your work will also be marked on how well you have covered the learning outcomes.

You can find the learning outcomes in your module handbook and often on the assessment brief or guidance itself. Remember, different assignments will address different learning outcomes for a module.

They are always related to what your tutors expect you to be able to demonstrate for successful completion of a module.

A title might look like this:

'Critically analyse how adoption of marketing techniques can enhance the performance of a company.'

The learning outcomes:

Identify and discuss the nature of marketing and its role within business

Review how the marketing functions operates within an organisation

Demonstrate an understanding of the role and value of marketing in adding value to products and organisation.

To answer the question, you must ensure full coverage of these learning outcomes.

A good tip is to colour code your outcomes and once your assignment is complete, highlight what you have written against the outcomes to see that you have given sufficient attention and coverage to ALL learning outcomes.

Step 5- What do you need to know next?

Now that you have deconstructed the question you are ready to start thinking about demonstrating your knowledge. If something in the assignment brief is unclear, check with your tutors as soon as possible before starting to plan your answer.

Consider the scope and angle of your assignment and think about:

What are you expected to use to answer the question?

What do you already know? Think about your lectures, seminar detail and discussions with peers. In subjects such as health or education you might reflect on your own practice.

Check in on any learning episodes you might need to revisit or give attention to, if you have missed any sessions.

Refer back to your reading list to develop baseline knowledge and look for any gaps.

Think about what you already know confidently and what you need to go away and find out more about. You will need to read widely to support your ideas and you can learn more about where to do this on our UniSkills web pages.

This coverage will inform your reading which must be completed before you embark upon the planning stage.

Activity: Once you have read and digested the information, why not spend some time exploring one of your own questions or titles and follow steps one to five to find your focus.

Planning effectively

Checking you have a focus can support you to plan effectively and help you to produce academic writing that is coherent and engaging.

Focus and planning are different. Read about the characteristics of each below.

Focus:

Understanding the type of writing you are expected to carry out

Identifying and understanding the learning outcomes

Paying attention to instructional words in the title

Defining the scope of your topic

Carried out before you start planning

Defining purpose and reader

Planning:

Carried out before you start writing

Identifying key arguments, and outlining how these arguments will be developed

Establishing a clear trajectory for your writing

Uses headings, subheadings and bullet points to plan your main ideas

Uses mind maps to visually come up with ideas and connections

Why should I plan?

It is essential to plan your academic assignments and recognise how it is an important step in the writing process. By taking the time to plan carefully, you can improve the quality of your writing, manage your time more effectively, and produce strong submissions.

Using the information you have from the above steps one to five, you can now consider a clear and logical outline of your assignment. This will help you to organise your ideas into a structure with clear main points, supporting details, and transitions between paragraphs. Outlines tend to be hierarchical and:

Create a clear and logical outline of your assignment.

Divide the assignment into sections or subsections.

Determine the main points to cover in each section.

Ensure that the outline aligns with the requirements of the assignment guidelines.

Planning tools

The best planning tool for academic assignments will depend on your individual preferences so experimenting with different tools and techniques can help you find the best approach.

There are many options for planning. Below are some explanations of the most common types.

Mind mapping: Mind mapping is a visual planning technique that allows you to plan ideas and make connections whilst finding relationships between different concepts or arguments. It involves creating a diagram with a central topic and branching out with related ideas, supporting evidence, and counterarguments. Mind maps can help you see the big picture and make connections between different parts of your essay.

Storyboarding: Storyboarding is a planning tool commonly used in visual mediums like film and graphic design, but it can also be adapted for academic essays. You can create a storyboard with panels representing different sections or paragraphs of your essay, along with brief descriptions or key points for each panel. Storyboarding helps you to visualise the structure and flow of your essay and identify any gaps or inconsistencies in your arguments.

Concept mapping: Similar to mind mapping, concept mapping is a visual tool that helps you to organise and structure your ideas. Concept maps use nodes or bubbles to represent different concepts or ideas, connected by lines or arrows to show relationships or connections between them. Concept mapping can be especially useful for complex topics with multiple interrelated concepts or arguments.

Linear: Uses headings, subheadings and bullet points to plan your main ideas. This can be useful to plan out your writing paragraph by paragraph.

Sentence Outlines: Sentence outlines are more detailed than traditional outlines and include full sentences or phrases for each point or section of the essay. This type of outline provides a more granular overview of the essay's content and can help you plan the development of your arguments and the flow of your writing.

Top Tip: Inspiration is an assistive technology mind mapping tool and free to use for all EHU students It is ideal for visually organising your thoughts to create detailed plans that can support you with your academic writing. There is an example of linear content below which can be added to this software.

The title Business Model Canvas sits in the middle of a mindmap.

Each number represents a main paragraph heading.

Each capital letter represents a subheading and each lowercase letter presents a subsection of the main subheading:

I. Customer Relationships

A. Expectations?

B. Cost to serve?

C. Maintain/grow

D. Retain

2. Cost Structure

A. Most important costs?

B. Expensive resources?

C. Expensive activities?

D. Fixed/Variable

3.Key Partners

A. Identify

B. Providing what?

C. Best partners?

4. Customer Segments

A. Most important?

B. Most motivated?

C. Underserved?

5. Channels

A. Discovery

B. Evaluation

C. Purchase

D. Delivery

6. Revenue Streams

A. Willing to pay for...

B. Payment methods?

C. Preferred methods?

D. Contributions?

7.Key Activities

A. Required for Value Proposition?

B. Important for

a. Distribution

b. Discovery

c. Customer

8.Value Proposition

A. Customer

1. Pain

2. Gain

B. Decision triggers?

C. Return on use

D. What value we deliver

Activity: Take a moment to reflect on the planning options above and decide which one you think might be most beneficial to you.

Structure and organisation

Academic writing requires you to present your ideas in a logical manner. Organising your ideas and arguments, so that your structure is easy to follow and understand, is a key requirement in ensuring you meet your brief. Using your assignment plan will inform your writing and keep you on track.

Read below to learn more about the typical key sections to include in your assignment. Do remember to always check your assignment brief, for any additional or different direction, provided by your tutors.

Introduction

The beginning of your assignment should have a clear introduction, the purpose of this is to:

- introduce the reader to the topic
- identify any key assignment terms and provide relevant definitions
- provide a clear overview of what will be discussed
- provide a thesis statement

Your introduction should be approximately 5%-10% of your word count.

The thesis statement can be established once you have carried out the steps above and you have a strong sense of the direction of your assignment.

Your thesis statement should be specific. It should cover only what you will discuss in your assignment as well as an indication of structure.

You may find you need to revise your thesis statement to reflect exactly what you have discussed in the assignment.

Example: This essay will critically analyse the intricate relationship between social media and mental health, analysing its dual role in fostering connectivity and exacerbating negative psychological outcomes such as comparison and cyberbullying.

Top Tip - You may find it easier to write your introduction last. Just because it's at the beginning of your assignment, it doesn't mean you have to start your writing at this point.

Body paragraphs

The bulk of your writing will take place in the middle paragraphs, between the introduction and conclusion. These body paragraphs should:

- consist of the bulk of your word count (approximately 80%)
- answer the assignment brief and cover the set learning outcomes
- be clear and concise, with one point per paragraph (find out more about SEED below)
- critically develop your argument, based on what you have read
- be fully supported (cited) with appropriate academic literature and other credible sources

Top Tip - Begin to build your reference list as soon as you start to include citations within your writing. Leaving it until you have finished writing will create a task which takes a lot longer to complete.

Conclusion

The end of your assignment should include a succinct conclusion, the purpose of this is to:

- remind the reader of the assignment question that was discussed
- summarise the main points raised in your discussion
- signpost to any key implications or recommendations based on what was discussed
- Your conclusion should be approximately 5%-10% of your word count.

Top Tip - No new information should be provided in the conclusion, this section is purely a summary.

Paragraph structure: Using SEED

To maintain a logical flow to your writing, aim for each paragraph to include one point only. If you are going to move on to a new point to discuss, start a new paragraph.

When structuring your paragraphs, SEED can be a useful tool to help you check your academic writing.

The different sections of a SEED paragraph are written below:

What does SEED stand for?

SEED is a mnemonic which can help you to remember how to structure your paragraphs. It stands for:

Statement

Expand

Evidence

Develop

When editing your writing, it can be helpful to check that you have included each of these four steps within your paragraph structure.

SEED: Statement

Statement: This is the opening sentence of your paragraph. It explains what is going to be discussed and links your writing back to the question you are answering.

Expand

Evidence

Develop

Statement example: Wilson (2024) has identified that the rise in violence and aggression towards healthcare professionals is being underreported.

SEED: Expand

Statement

Expand: Next you would expand on the point raised and give more information if necessary.

Evidence

Develop

Expand example: Reasons for not reporting incidences are significant but complex, such as…

SEED: Evidence

Statement

Expand

Evidence: To support the point you are making, you need to include citations to relevant literature (this may include academic and grey literature).

Develop

Evidence example: According to McKenna (2023) there is a lack of appropriate support and training for staff subjected to violence and aggression, leading to many incidences not being reported. (Further supporting evidence here…).

SEED: Develop

Statement

Expand

Evidence

Develop: Think of the final section of your paragraph as a 'mini-conclusion'. You are summarising your point in relation to the evidence you have cited. Common language here may include; 'therefore', 'consequently', 'this suggests'.

Develop example: Therefore, it is essential that staff of all levels need to receive training in order to promote safety of service users, staff and visitors (NIMHE, 2022).

Bringing it together…

Statement: Wilson (2024) has identified that the rise in violence and aggression towards healthcare professionals is being underreported.

Expand: Reasons for not reporting incidences are significant but complex, such as…

Evidence: According to McKenna (2023) there is a lack of appropriate support and training for staff subjected to violence and aggression, leading to many incidences not being reported.

Develop: Therefore, it is essential that staff of all levels need to receive training in order to promote safety of service users, staff and visitors (NIMHE, 2022).

Whilst SEED offers a sound structure to start from, it only represents the key ingredients required. Depending on your year of study, you will need to adapt the level of criticality demonstrated. You can find out more about criticality on our UniSkills web pages and we will explore it a little more in the next section.

Building an argument

The key to building a strong argument in paragraphs is clarity, coherence, and persuasiveness. Each paragraph should contribute to the overall strength of your argument and guide the reader through your reasoning process effectively.

As covered in the last section, there is a useful structure to follow when it comes to writing your paragraphs but often students find it hard to build and develop an argument within a paragraph.

Once you have got to grips with the SEED paragraph structure, it's time to move on to building some analysis and criticality into your writing. This really helps to shape your argument.

The easiest way to begin thinking about this is to start to ask yourself two key questions about the literature and/ or the findings and discussions you are using to support your argument.

The two big questions:

So what?

Asking 'so what?' is a powerful tool in critical thinking because it prompts you to delve deeper into the significance and implications of a statement, argument, or piece of information.

Asking why it matters helps you filter out irrelevant information and focus on what's truly important to the topic at hand.

Probing the underlying assumptions behind a statement or argument can reveal biases, hidden agendas, or unsupported claims that may weaken the argument's validity.

Thinking about the consequences of a particular action, decision, or belief helps you consider both short-term and long-term effects and impacts, as well as potential unintended consequences.

Scrutinising the conclusions drawn from evidence or reasoning encourages you to examine whether the evidence truly supports the conclusion or if there are alternative interpretations.

Gaining deeper analysis and reflection pushes you to move beyond surface-level understanding and explore the broader implications or significance of a topic.

Some example questions to ask yourself (adapted from Learning Development, University of Plymouth, 2006) include:

So what do I have to say about this?

Is this argument/ insight/ idea/ intervention/ policy/ initiative successful / convincing? Why?

So what does this mean in the context of my assignment?

So what is the point of what the author is saying/ suggesting/ proposing?

So what are the underlying issues?

So what might the wider implications of this be?

In what way is this significant?

What next?

In academic writing within higher education, incorporating the question 'what next?' can enrich critical analysis and deepen exploration.

Asking 'what next?' prompts a forward-looking perspective, encouraging you to forecast future consequences or advancements resulting from what you have found in the literature. You may even go beyond this making recommendations yourself.

It stimulates critical thinking by compelling you to consider diverse potential scenarios and maybe even reflect upon your own practice.

Asking the question helps you to address uncertainty and meticulously scrutinise potential pitfalls and uncertainties within the literature.

It also serves as a catalyst for innovative problem-solving allowing you to foster creativity and ingenuity in your approach to help you reach overall conclusions.

Some example questions to ask yourself (adapted from Learning Development, University of Plymouth, 2006) include:

What can be learnt?

What needs to be done?

What is worth considering either now or in the future?

What is transferable?

What else can be applied?

Top Tip: If you are wanting to really demonstrate criticality, it can be worthwhile always having the word 'but' in your mind. As you read and write, say this word out loud. You'll be surprised what additional criticality can be pulled out. This may then lead you to anticipate and address potential counterarguments or objections. Phrases like 'some may argue that...' or 'however, it's important to consider...' prepare your audience for alternative perspectives and demonstrate that you've thought critically about your position.

The paragraph below is an example of how to incorporate the big questions after SEED has been completed.

Overcrowded cells and unsanitary conditions have a detrimental impact on individuals and impact wider society. The impact of these poor conditions, due to overcrowding, is perpetuating a system that often fails to fulfil its goals of rehabilitation and justice and the consequences may be significant. Jones (2021) suggests that these conditions create a toxic environment that can exacerbate criminal tendencies rather than rehabilitate individuals. Moreover, these conditions not only violate basic human rights but appear to also undermine the potential for inmates to reintegrate into society successfully upon release (Smith et al., 2019). The failure to address and rectify these issues reflects a lack of commitment to the principles of justice and compassion, ultimately producing a cycle of incarceration and recidivism (Wilde, 2003; Bloggs, 2018; Smith, 2019). To address the negative impacts of overcrowded cells, many criminal justice systems are exploring alternatives to incarceration (Brown and Graig, 2022). Improving prison infrastructure, expanding access to rehabilitation and education, and addressing the root causes of overincarceration are important steps in mitigating the consequences of overcrowded prisons. However, as Daniels (2018) highlights, funding and lack of

resource is not easy to secure, and responsibility should be shared among multiple stakeholders with adequate funding prioritised (Gill, 2021) to address the impact on the individual and wider society.

Here is the paragraph broken down with an explanation of what the student does well:

1. Overcrowded cells and unsanitary conditions have a detrimental impact on individuals and impact wider society.

   This first sentence is often called a statement **or** topic sentence**. Here you make a** point**, give** focus **to your paragraph and make** clear **your** argument**, often using the** words from the question.

2. The impact of these poor conditions, due to overcrowding, is perpetuating a system that often fails to fulfil its goals of rehabilitation and justice and the consequences may be significant.

   Now notice how the student **expands** on their original point, adding more information but keeping really **focused on the question.** You can choose to **cite** here, if you wish. Notice how the student uses **cautious language** 'may be' to show this is only one **perspective** being explored.

3. Jones (2021) suggests that these conditions create a toxic environment that can exacerbate criminal tendencies rather than rehabilitate individuals.

   Now the student starts to **build** their argument. Using the **literature** you have found aim to do the same, who supports your point? What other **viewpoints, perspectives or insights** can you put across to support your **argument**? Keep adding information by using/ layering **sources**. **Citations** can be used at the start, within sentences and at the end of sentences. Try varying this as you write to improve your writing style.

4. Moreover, these conditions not only violate basic human rights but appear to also undermine the potential for inmates to reintegrate into society successfully upon release (Smith et al., 2019).
   Here the student starts to **drill down** into the topic- considering things from different **perspectives** and shows that they aren't just considering one perspective.

They are using a **cohesive device** 'moreover' to **build** their argument, **connect** ideas and make their writing more **convincing**.

5. The failure to address and rectify these issues reflects a lack of commitment to the principles of justice and compassion, ultimately producing a cycle of incarceration and recidivism (Wilde, 2003; Bloggs, 2018; Smith, 2019).

   The student really wants to demonstrate **criticality** in their writing so they ask themselves the question, 'so what?' In answering the question, they can **fully explore** what they have identified is an issue and what the **wider implications** might be- all the time staying focused on the topic.

6. To address the negative impacts of overcrowded cells, many criminal justice systems are exploring alternatives to incarceration (Brown and Graig, 2022). Improving prison infrastructure, expanding access to rehabilitation and education, and addressing the root causes of overincarceration are important steps in mitigating the consequences of overcrowded prisons.

   The student goes a **step further** and asks themselves the question, **'what next?'** This enables them to consider what needs to be done or considered going forward in order to tackle the problem/ issue. By **reading widely** to find out the answer they can be sure they have **fully covered** this point before they move onto their next paragraph.

7. However, as Daniels (2018) highlights, funding and lack of resource is not easy to secure, and responsibility should be shared among multiple stakeholders with adequate funding prioritised (Gill, 2021) to address the impact on the individual and wider society.

   The student could have stopped prior to this sentence but instead choose to show their tutor that they **don't just accept** what the literature says should be done. Instead, they are **constantly challenging** and **thinking deeply** about **what else** might need to be considered. In this case the student is asking **'but...?'** and thinking of **limitations.**

8. Notice how the student finishes this paragraph with a **focus back** on the question ensuring the paragraph is **top and tailed**.

Activity: Consider an assignment you are currently working towards or maybe a submission you have received marks for already. Choose one paragraph and identify what aspects of building an argument you can find in your own work. Make a note of anything missing and really strive to build in the missing elements in forthcoming submissions.

Quoting and paraphrasing

Ways of referencing

When you start to write, it is important to consider how you will present evidence from the literature. The two ways to cite your sources (reference) are quoting and paraphrasing.

Quoting

Quoting is when you use someone else's words in your writing, exactly as they appear in the original source. Quotes should still always be referenced!

Quotes are useful when providing a definition, or when you are citing from guidelines or policies. Remember to try and keep quotations to a minimum but if you do need to quote, it is best to keep it short.

According to the Oxford English Dictionary (2025), quoting can also be defined as; "To give a reference (to a passage of text), by specifying the page, chapter, etc., where it may be found".

Note: Referencing styles all have different rules around quoting. The table below gives more information about each of the styles used at Edge Hill University.

Referencing Style	Short Quotations	Long Quotations
APA	Fewer than 40 words "Double quotation marks" are used around the quoted words. Quotes need to be fully cited, including the author, year of publication, and the page number.	40 words or more Long quotations are formatted as a block, on a new line and indented from the left margin. Long quotes do not require a full stop after the closing citation or the page numbers (which should be in brackets).

Referencing Style	Short Quotations	Long Quotations
Edge Hill Harvard Style	Up to 2 lines of text 'Single quotation marks' are used around the quoted words. Quotes need to be fully cited, including the author, year of publication, and the page number.	More than 2 lines of text Long quotations are presented as an indented paragraph, with a single line space both before and after the quote. Quotation marks are not required here.
MHRA	Up to 40 words, or less than 2 lines of verse 'Single quotation marks' are used around the quoted words. Line divisions within a verse are marked by a spaced upright stroke [|].	Over 40 words, or more than 2 lines of verse Long quotations are indented, with a full line space both before and after the quote. Quotation marks are not required here.
OSCOLA	Up to 3 lines of text 'Single quotation marks' are used around the quoted words. The footnote marker comes after the closing quotation mark and any punctuation.	Longer than 3 lines of text Long quotations are presented as an indented paragraph, with a single line space both before and after the quote. Quotation marks are not required here.
Vancouver	Up to 40 words 'Single quotation marks' are used around the quoted words. Direct quotations require the citation marker followed by the page number.	More than 40 words Long quotes are indented from the left, with a full line space both before and after the quote. The page number is included in superscript after the citation marker.

Paraphrasing

To paraphrase is to express the meaning of a source text, using your own words.

The source of the information still needs to be referenced however, unlike quoting, there is no need to include speech marks or a page number.

According to the Oxford English Dictionary (2025), paraphrasing is:

"A rewording of something written or spoken by someone else, especially with the aim of making the sense clearer."

Why is paraphrasing important?

Paraphrasing is an important academic skill. It enables you to demonstrate that you understand the content well enough to put it into your own words.

Paraphrasing enables you to find your own academic voice by synthesising the information you have read.

It also allows you to demonstrate that you have carried out the required reading, and have understood the material.

Different types of paraphrasing

The two main ways to paraphrase are by summarising key ideas or themes, and paraphrasing short sections of text.

Summarising key ideas or themes

When you approach academic writing by reading widely to inform your knowledge on a topic, you will paraphrase overarching ideas or concepts that you have read about across a range of quality sources.

By making effective notes at the reading stage, you can use these notes to develop your ideas, and successfully paraphrase without worrying about accidentally using the exact wording from the original text(s).

Note: The note-making section of the Academic Reading Toolkit offers more information on how to make and use your notes effectively, including a chance to practice this skill.

Finding your academic voice

Most of your university work will be comprised of the ideas of others (evidence-based). Who, when, and how you cite others is what forms your argument.

Think of yourself as a DJ making 'original' music from the pre-recorded sounds of others.

Paraphrasing short sections of text

Occasionally you will need to paraphrase a small section of text rather than an overarching idea. When doing this it is important to ensure that you don't replicate too much of the original wording.

Using synonyms to change key words is not enough - a successful paraphrase will also have a different sentence structure and order of ideas to the original.

Clumsy paraphrasing can be considered plagiarism, so if you struggle to paraphrase short sections of text, it is a good idea to practice!

Tips for paraphrasing small sections of text

Step 1: Understand. Be sure that you understand the text you want to paraphrase. Read through the text several times to be sure that you fully understand and can recall the key elements.

Step 2: Recall. Think about the key elements of the section you have just read. Ensure that you can recall them without looking back at the original source.

Step 3: Speak aloud. Get someone to ask you about what you have read and then explain it to them. If you are on your own, imagine that someone has asked you about what you have read. If you understand something you will be able to talk about it, and we all verbally paraphrase naturally.

You may find that you say something aloud, realise that you have paraphrased it well, and immediately forget what you said! If you find that this happens you can try recording yourself speaking and listen back to your own words.

Step 4: Write. Listen back to your recording (or remember what you said aloud) and re-write it using formal academic language. By remembering the key ideas or concepts from the original text, and using your own words to convey them, you are paraphrasing. Always remember to reference your paraphrase!

Summary: Paraphrasing is an important academic skill, and like any other skill it will develop over time with practice. Following these steps when you have a small section of text to paraphrase will help you to develop your own academic voice, whilst ensuring your work is underpinned with evidence from the literature.

Reflective Writing

During your time at university, you may be asked to write reflectively. For some students, this can be a new way of writing and as such it may feel unfamiliar. Understanding why we write reflectively, how it works, and how it looks, will help you to adapt your writing style appropriately.

What is reflective writing?

Reflective writing requires you to reflect on a scenario, your own actions, experiences or a particular event. This may be in a specific setting such as on placement in a school or in an area of healthcare. It requires you to reflect, as a practitioner, on your own practice or a process and then link your reflections to further new knowledge. Unlike most academic writing, you are able to discuss your own emotions, thoughts and ideas in relation to the assignment question set. Reflective writing should, however, still demonstrate criticality, in fact you may be asked to write a 'critical reflection'.

Why write reflectively?

Linking your experiences to wider academic literature, demonstrates critical thinking and an awareness on how to synthesise practice, theory and research. Alongside detailing what you have experienced, you will most likely also be discussing what you have learnt and how this may impact upon your practice or development going forward. You may want to consider things that went well, things you would do differently, different approaches you could have undertaken, limitations and future recommendations. This then leads to the identification of actions, which can be implemented later, or suggestions to enhance professional practice or performance.

Top Tip: It can be easy to fall into descriptive writing when reflecting - for example, stating what happened. To ensure that you write a critical reflection, think about the significance and context of the event, this promotes your 'what', to the 'so what?'.

What does reflective writing look like?

Reflective writing can take various forms, including essays, journals, portfolios, or reports. It is usually written in first person but will also consist of third person when you are supporting your reflections with evidence from academic reading.

The examples below include some detail about the different form of reflective writing and what they might entail.

Reflective essay

This will usually follow a traditional essay structure, requiring you to reflect on an experience, event or personal philosophy.

You will most likely be writing in first person but may also switch to third person.

Whilst this may require a more personal written response, as you may be analysing your beliefs, values or experiences, remember to not be overly emotive and still write in a formal manner.

Limit the amount of descriptive writing you use. You will of course need to provide some background information, but focusing on why something may have happened (and the potential impact), rather than describing what happened, will demonstrate greater critical reflection skills.

Academic literature should be cited to support your personal reflections, allowing for critical discussion.

Learning log/ Journal

You may be asked to keep a log, journal or diary during a placement or project.

Here you would record your experiences and thoughts, this may be before, during or after an event.

Criticality can be achieved by thinking more deeply on the topic, rather than just describing what happened

Portfolio

A portfolio allows you to collate different materials for assessment together.

As part of this you may be asked to produce reflective statements relating to other areas of your portfolio.

Getting started with your reflective writing

Planning

Keep an ongoing log of your reflections, so they can be referred to easily during the writing process.

Produce a planning grid to capture more in-depth reflections.

Reflective writing still requires engagement with critical thinking and reading.

Set time aside for research and wider reading.

Structure

Like a conventional essay, a reflective piece of writing still requires a structure. You should still expect to produce an introduction, main body and conclusion.

You may be asked to use a model of reflection within your writing, for example:

Gibbs' (1988) Reflective Cycle

Kolb's (1984) Experiential Learning Cycle

Driscoll's (1994) Model of Reflection

These models can help provide a structure to follow and allow you to assess all levels of an experience or event. They also help you to identify when the process is complete.

Aim for a balance of your own perspective and demonstrating you are well informed. In your paragraphs, you will weave in new knowledge to support your reflection and make connections. Be mindful of your learning outcomes and regularly check you have the right focus.

Writing style

Whilst most of your academic assignments will be written in the third person, reflective writing requires a different style.

This will possibly include:

Using a first-person narrative voice when reflecting on your own personal experiences or a scenario.

Using the third-person when referring to key literature to help support your main argument.

Increased freedom to be slightly more emotive and subjective.

Expecting to still use an academically appropriate tone and utilise vocabulary appropriate to academic writing – Academic Phrasebank is useful for providing guidance with developing your phraseology.

Remembering that signposting and transitional phrases will still be important to support the reader through your written work.

Avoiding being too descriptive, you should aim to be analytical, as far as possible.

Expecting that citations and a reference list are likely to be incorporated.

Top tip: Use a Reflective Learning Log and/or Reflective Planning Grid. Organisation is key to helping you keep an accurate record of your reflections, and these tools can help you with this.

Reflective learning log

This Reflective Learning Log is intended to be an ‘on-the-go’ document that you complete regularly throughout your practice.

It is not intended to be a neat or complete ‘finished article’ (you can use the accompanying Planning Grid to create a more comprehensive, structured account of your experiences).

Try to complete this log as your experiences occur; this way, it will capture a more authentic account of your experience.

Planning grid

This Reflective Planning Grid accompanies the Reflective Learning Log.

Whilst the Reflective Learning Log helps you to reflect on your actions ‘in the moment’, this Planning Grid is a more organised reflection-on-action afterwards.

Don’t forget you will need to incorporate academic sources throughout your reflection.

Models of reflection

When undertaking a reflective assignment, you may be asked to follow a reflective model to structure your thoughts and writing.

Below are some commonly used models of reflection. There are however many other reflective models which you can use to guide your reflection. Your module handbook, assignment guidance and tutor may suggest a model of reflection best suited to your particular course. It is worth taking the time to look at a few, before deciding which is the best fit for your assignment.

Top Tip: Read you assignment guidance carefully. If you have been asked to follow a particular reflective model, you should use the one specified and make it clear within your writing.

Some examples of common models are provided below:

Gibbs (1998)

The Gibbs Reflective Cycle (1998) is a model developed by Graham Gibbs. In professional settings - such as education, healthcare and social work - it can be used to encourage deeper reflection on experiences.

The cycle has six distinct stages:

Description: This first stage requires you to think about, and describe what happened, alongside where and when it happened. You may also want to consider who else was involved during the experience/event, and what you were feeling/thinking at the time.

Feelings: This stage allows you to reflect more upon the thoughts and emotions you experienced before, during, and after the event. You could also reflect on what others may have been feeling if they were involved.

Evaluation: Here you can reflect on what went well, what didn't go well, and anything that could be improved. There may also be ethical or moral implications to consider. This stage allows you to think about positive and negative aspects of the experience/event, so you have a clear picture about what happened.

Analysis: Once you have clearly understood what happened, you can begin to explore the significance and wider impact of the experience/event. Ask yourself why things happened the way they did, if the outcome could have been different, and if so - what could have influenced this? Finally, what has the experience taught you?

Conclusion: Once you have undertaken your analysis, you can begin to draw your conclusions. Has your view on what happened changed or been challenged? What did you learn? How might reflecting on this experience/event influence your future practice?

Action Plan: Finally, what impact will this reflection have during similar events/experiences? Your action plan can help you to identify any skills or knowledge you still need to develop, and how that future learning could improve your practice further.

Following the stages listed above, you can use the Gibb’s Reflective Cycle (1998) as a tool to reflect and think critically. This process will support you in developing your self-awareness, to gain deeper insights and promote the potential to enhance your own professional practice.

Kolb (1984)

Kolb's Cycle of Reflective Practice (1984), is a theoretical framework developed by David Kolb. It describes how individuals learn from their experiences through a cyclical process of reflection and action. Sometimes referred to as the Experiential Learning Cycle, Kolb's model is particularly influential in fields such as education and psychology.

The cycle has four stages:

Concrete Experience: This stage concerns being actively involved in the experience/event. This may be a real-life situation, a simulated event, or even an experiment. You will experience the situation first-hand.

Reflective Observation: Following the experience, you will reflect upon what happened, thinking deeply about any observations, thoughts or feelings you may have. Here you are taking a step back from the experience/event itself, so you are able to gain greater perspective and understand any potential significance.

Abstract Conceptualisation: Once you have made your reflective observations, you will need to analyse them further, allowing you to identify any patterns or form concepts. Think more broadly here, how do your observations relate to existing knowledge, theory or frameworks?

Active Experimentation: The final stage requires you to apply what you have learned from the experience/event to new situations. You may want to test out new ideas or strategies, based upon your reflections. This period of active experimentation can allow you to refine your skills and understanding further.

Kolb's Cycle of Reflective Practice (1984) is an ongoing learning process, where each cycle builds upon the previous one, through a continual cycling of the stages. Therefore, the reflection allows you to gain deeper insights over time.

This framework emphasises the importance of being actively engaged in experiences, critically reflecting upon them, before making sense from those observations and applying this meaning to new situations.

Driscoll (1994)

Driscoll's Model of Reflection (1994) is a framework developed by Janet Driscoll. As a structured approach to reflection, it is often used within healthcare education and practice. Driscoll's model is designed to help individuals reflect on their experiences, identify learning, and apply that learning to improve their practice.

The framework consists of three key questions:

What?: This question asks you to describe the experience/event or situation which you intend to reflect upon. Think about what happened, where and when it occurred, and who was involved. You should be able to set the context for the experience

So what?: The second question requires you to reflect and consider what you learnt from the experience. You could think about any new skills or knowledge you have gained, and if you had any emotional/personal insights. Exploring the significance of the experience through deeper reflection, should allow you to critically consider its impact on your learning and practice.

Now what?: The final question prompts you to consider how you will translate your reflection into action. Here you will be considering how to apply your learning to future practice, this could be through setting goals, making changes or developing ways to improve.

Consisting of three simple questions, Driscoll's Model of Reflection (1994) is straightforward and practical. It aims to guide you through a structured process of reflection, allowing you to gain insight, identify areas for growth, and take meaningful action to improve your practice.

Improve your reflective writing through reading

One of the best ways to learn and improve your skills, is to explore examples of how something is done.

Below you can find some example journal articles which demonstrate reflective writing. Sometimes a reflective model may have been used to structure the reflection, but not always.

Activity: Why not read a reflective article that is perhaps related to your subject of study, or perhaps just something that interests you. Whilst reading, can you identify if a reflective model has been used? There are some examples of reflective writing below to get you started.

Example 1 (Sport)

CROFT, C., MILLER, J. and STOKOWSKI, S., 2021. Implementing Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory Into Men's Collegiate Basketball Sport Marketing Project. Sport Management Education Journal [online]. 15, pp. 127-129. Available from: https://doi.org/10.1123/smej.2020-0028 [Accessed 6 June 2024].

Example 2 (Education)

MARKKANEN, P., VALIMAKI, M., ANTTILA, M and KUUSKORPI, M., 2020. A reflective cycle: Understanding challenging situations in a school setting. Educational Research [online]. 62 (1), pp. 46-62. Available from: https://doi-org.edgehill.idm.oclc.org/10.1080/00131881.2020.1711790 [Accessed 6 June 2024].

Example 3 (Nursing)

REYNOLDS, S., 2022. A district nurse's reflection on pre-registration nursing education: a troubling position. British Journal of Community Nursing [online]. 27 (11), pp. 546-550. Available from: https://doi.org/10.12968/bjcn.2022.27.11.546 [Accessed 6 June 2024].

Example 4 (Counselling)

SACCO, K. K., 2022. Infusing Adventure Based Counseling Techniques into Counselor Education. Journal of Creativity in Mental Health [online]. 17 (3), pp. 292-304. Available from: https://doi.org/10.1080/15401383.2020.1870598 [Accessed 6 June 2024].

Example 5 (Medicine)

TERRY, T. and BATES, A. S., 2021. The reflective urologist. Journal of Clinical Urology [online]. 14 (4), pp. 300-305. Available from: https://doi.org/10.1177/2051415820966907 [Accessed 6 June 2024].

Example 6 (Business)

ZAKARIA, N., SEHGAL, R., WATSON. A. and KAMARUDIN, K. A., 2023. Staying afloat? Using a reflective cycle approach to examine the effects of crisis on the business resilience of SMEs during COVID-19. Journal or General Management [online]. 48 (3), pp. 267-281. Available from: https://doi.org/10.1177/03063070221088371 [Accessed 6 June 2024].

Report Writing

Report writing is a common form of assessment at UK universities across various disciplines.

Your tutors might choose to assess your report writing skills in order to evaluate your ability to research, analyse, and communicate information effectively.

Reports assess not only the content knowledge but also your skills in critical thinking, synthesis of information, and written communication.

How are reports and essays different?

Report writing and essay writing share some of the conventional features of academic writing. You will be expected to plan your writing, carry out research and reading, demonstrate communication and organisation of ideas whist ensuring you cite and reference and, of course, edit and proofread.

However, report writing may be a style and structure you are not as familiar with or have not yet had opportunity to practice.

Essays

Essays tend to present an argument or viewpoint whilst providing insights.

They aim to explore and analyse a topic from various angles.

Essays are much more discursive in style.

Can be written in first or third person depending on the guidance from your tutor.

Typically, won't have headings and subheadings but instead follow an introduction, main body and conclusion structure.

Typically, won’t have any visuals.

Reports

Reports typically focus on conveying information or presenting findings from research or investigations.

Will usually have an aim and often highlight something new and interesting or have a practical purpose, such as informing decision-making.

They aim to provide factual and concise information in a clear and organised manner.

Report writing uses clear and concise language and sentences.

May include features such as bullet point lists to summarise information.

Written in a formal academic tone of voice and, unless your tutor identifies otherwise, in the third person.

The focus is on using language to present information objectively and minimising the author’s personal presence.

Usually follow a structure with headings and subheadings.

Uses tables, charts, graphs and other visuals.

Might incorporate technical or specialist language.

Will likely require the use of technologies for reporting and presenting data.

Activity: Explore the sections below for support on how to effectively structure academic reports.

Typical report structure

You should remember to follow any guidance provided by your tutors, as the structure and content of reports can vary widely depending on your discipline and the specific assignment guidelines.

Title

This typically includes the title of the report, your name, the date, the course name and number and the name of your institution.

Contents page

Can help readers navigate the document easily. This Microsoft 365 support video provides step by step instructions to help you create a table of contents in your Word document.

Abstract/ executive summary

A brief summary of the report's main points, including the research question, methodology, key findings, and conclusions.

In business reports the abstract is often replaced with an executive summary.

Introduction

Introduces the topic, provides context, states the purpose of the report and outlines the structure that the report will follow. It often includes a clear statement of the research question or problem being addressed.

Literature review

Here you will review relevant literature and research related to your topic. It demonstrates your understanding of existing knowledge and helps establish the significance of your research.

Methodology

More likely to appear in a scientific report, it describes the methods used to conduct your research. It explains how you collected data, what tools or instruments you used and the rationale behind your choices. This section should be detailed enough for someone else to replicate your study.

Results and findings

Present your findings in a clear and organised manner. You might be communicating ideas or insights, but you might also be presenting data. You might choose to use graphs, tables, charts and textual descriptions to communicate your data effectively. Using these can enhance the clarity, organisation and overall effectiveness of your document. These visual aids serve various purposes and can make complex information more accessible to your readers.

Discussion/ analysis/ interpretation

This section can look very different depending on the type of report you are writing. It might include:

Interpretation of Results: Interpret the findings in light of the objectives or research questions of your report. Discuss what the findings suggest about the topic or issue you're exploring.

Comparison with Expectations or Previous Studies: If applicable, compare your findings with what was expected or with findings from previous studies. Discuss any similarities, differences, or unexpected results.

Implications: Discuss the implications of your findings. What do they mean in the context of the broader topic or issue? How do they contribute to our understanding of the subject matter?

Limitations: Acknowledge any limitations or constraints of your study that may have affected the findings. This could include limitations in data collection, methodology, or analysis.

If your report is more technical or scientific then you will find this is where you will analyse and interpret the results presented in the earlier sections of your report, such as the results or findings section.

Conclusion

Wrap up your report by summarising the main points and presenting the final takeaways from your study.

Recommendations

At this point you will have a strong sense of the 'what next?' You will need to consider:

Future Directions: Suggest possible areas for further research or investigation based on your findings.

What questions remain unanswered?

How could future studies build upon the work presented in your report?

Recommendations: If appropriate, provide recommendations based on your findings. These could be recommendations for action, policy recommendations, or suggestions for addressing any issues identified in the report.

References

In text citations and references are essential components of an academic report. Check with your tutor to identify which referencing style you should use and find referencing support on our UniSkills webpages.

Appendix/ appendices

Using these allows you to include additional material that support your main findings or arguments but might be too detailed or lengthy to include in the main body of the report.

These sources of data might include tables, graphs and charts but could also include transcripts or questionnaires or any longer document which you might wish to summarise or refer to within the main body.

You will need to cite any appendices within your text (…as evidenced in Table 1…) and if you are summarising data within the report you would also include the full details in your appendices (…see Appendix A for full survey results…).

Activity: Take some time to reflect on the type of report you have been asked to produce. Check your guidelines and identify which of the above report sections you might need to use.

Using visuals in your report

Visuals are often necessary when you need to report the findings of your research. Figures (in the form of graphs, charts, images, diagrams) and tables can be used to present data, clarify interpretations and to explain concepts.

Creating a visual

Before choosing to use a visual, firstly ensure there is a purpose for it; usually this is to present complex data or ideas. Creating your visual often causes students the most concern and you will inevitably need to access and use software to produce your visuals so they look professional. At higher levels of study you may choose to use data visualisation tools such as Python or Looker Studio but for most students Microsoft Word and Excel can provide you with the tools you need.

Support for creating graphs, charts and tables and using Microsoft Word and Excel to their full potential is available on your TechSkills web pages. Additionally, if you prefer videos, access LinkedIn Learning to explore a playlist which will help you explore the functionality of both.

Labelling a visual

Labelling visuals is crucial for effectively communicating information to your reader. Clear and concise labelling helps readers understand the content more easily and accurately.

There is some advice about to label tables below

These will be numbered consecutively throughout: Table 1, Table 2, Table 3, and so on. After the numbering there should be a short and concise title at the top of the table.

In tables, clearly label the headers of each column and, if necessary, the row headers.

There is some advice about to label figures below:

These will be numbered consecutively throughout: Figure 1, Figure 2, Figure 3, and so on. After the numbering there should be a short and concise title in a caption for figures which appear below the figure itself.

For charts and graphs that have axes (e.g., bar graphs, line graphs), make sure to label each axis clearly. Include the name of the variable being measured and the unit of measurement if applicable. Ensure that the labels are readable and positioned appropriately.

If necessary, include data labels directly on the visual elements to provide specific information about data points. This is particularly useful to indicate exact values.

If your visual element includes multiple datasets or categories, include a legend to explain the meaning of different colours, patterns or symbols used. Place the legend in a clear and accessible location, such as the corner of the chart or graph.

Some tutors advise against colour so do check guidelines.

The advice below relates to both tables and figures:

Ensure that all labels are clear, concise, and easy to understand. Avoid jargon or overly technical language that might confuse readers.

When using data from external sources, it's important to provide proper attribution by including a source.

This can be placed below the visual element and should include the name of the source, publication date (if available), and any other relevant information.

Referring to a visual

Visuals rarely act as a replacement for text. You should still aim to explain concepts and theories and present your data in any narrative. The figures support what you have written and you should always aim to connect a figure to the text. Our UniSkills guide 'Using Visual Elements in a Report' contains some useful advice about the ways you should refer to your visuals in your report.

Activity: Try some self study! Access Chapter 8 of Success in Academic Writing to learn more about creating tables, graphs and charts of various kinds.

Academic Phrasebank also provides useful vocabulary and phrases for reporting results including describing trends in data so why not set some time aside to explore and identify anything you might find useful?

Scientific Writing

What is scientific writing?

At Edge Hill, you may be asked to engage in various types of scientific writing depending on your field of study, level of education, and specific course requirements.

Scientific writing differs from everyday writing in several ways, primarily due to its focus on clarity, precision, objectivity, and adherence to specific conventions within the scientific community.

Activity: Access the YouTube video for an overview of scientific writing guidelines and best practice. Jot down anything unfamiliar to you so you can commit to learn more about it either throughout this lesson or by accessing further resources. You can turn on closed captions and access a transcript via Youtube.

The language of scientific writing

You will notice that scientific writing uses clear and precise language to convey complex ideas and information.

Additionally, the writing style is precise and avoids ambiguity, and terms are defined explicitly to ensure understanding.

Technical terminology and jargon specific to the field of study will be present, assuming expertise with subject matter.

The conventions of scientific writing

There are certain expectations related to the way you will write within different disciplines. Once you start paying close attention to what you are reading in your discipline then you will soon realise that there is commonality in the structure and style of what you are accessing. This is great news as you can start to emulate this in your own scientific writing!

Some common terms and definitions are below:

Purpose: communicating research and findings, methodologies and theories

Audience: other researchers and scholars in the same field

Objectivity: presents evidence-based arguments and avoiding personal bias and opinion

Structure and organisation: a format to help readers navigate the content efficiently and locate specific information

Data: presented in tables, graphs, and figures to enhance clarity and facilitate interpretation

Evidence: presentation and analysis of empirical data and evidence to support hypothesis

Structuring scientific writing

Whether you are writing a scientific research paper or a practical report you can expect that it will be organised logically into sections that follow strict conventions. These sections allow the reader to locate the information they are seeking and the structured format promotes transparency and reproducibility by clearly documenting the research process.

This allows other researchers to replicate the study and verify its results, contributing to the credibility and reliability of scientific research.

The following is a typical report structure. This has been reproduced from Day's (2018) Success in Academic Writing.

Title

A practical report title is short – customarily no more than 15 words. It precisely and concisely refers to the investigation's topic and its scope.

For example: Applying transtheoretical models of behaviour change to increase physical activity in males aged 35– 55.

Abstract

An abstract summarises the investigation's context, aim, method, results and conclusion for the investigation.

It gives the reader sufficient information to decide whether the report is of interest and should be read.

An abstract is normally between 150 and 300 words (check the precise requirements for your assignment).

A well-written abstract has a balance of the above features. Being brief, the abstract does not include a discussion. Traditionally, it does not cite references.

Introduction

The introduction provides the context for the rest of the practical report. Typically, it contains some or all of the following elements:

Why the investigation is important or useful

The theoretical and/or practical context for the investigation, citing relevant literature

Key definitions and abbreviations

The aim(s) of the investigation, questions it seeks to answer or hypotheses it seeks to test

Materials and methods

Conventionally, a Method section (sometimes called Materials and Methods, or Procedure) gives enough detail so that a reader can repeat the investigation using the information provided.

A full Method section typically contains:

Experimental subjects: Microbes, plants, animals or people that are the subjects of the investigation. Where appropriate, give precise information about their characteristics and how samples were obtained.

Materials: Chemicals (including detail of amounts, concentrations, physical form, and so on) and other media (such as a particular growth medium for microbes or plants).

Conditions: Physical factors, such as temperature and pressure, and any other factors that are likely to influence the outcome of the investigation. Apparatus. Equipment of all kinds, including measuring and recording devices, used in carrying out the investigation.

Procedure: What was done, how and, where appropriate, why.

Sometimes the various elements of the section are listed separately under subsection headings. Check the precise guidelines for your assignment.

Results/ findings

Unless specifically requested by your tutor, a results section does not normally contain raw data. Rather, it contains data that are presented and analysed in ways that respond to the investigation’s aim(s).

It is usual to guide the reader through the presented data, highlighting the points you wish to bring to the reader’s attention, which will be referred to in the discussion and conclusion.

Any data is typically presented in numbered tables, graphs, or both, which are referred to in the text.

A table is a means of arranging summaries of data (often in the form of numbers) in columns and rows to enable ready comparison.

A graph or chart – such as line graphs, scatter plots, bar charts and histograms – reveals relationships between variables in a visual form.

Data that is presented in tables or graphs may be accompanied by statistical analyses, together with their interpretation.

See Chapter 8 of Success in Academic Writing for information about creating tables, graphs and charts of various kinds. Further support is available in the UniSkills guide: Using Visual Elements in Reports.

The lesson 'Report Writing' in this toolkit contains useful advice about creating, labelling and referring to visual elements in reports.

Discussion

The discussion of a practical report is typically a distinct section after the data has been presented. It includes some or all of the following items (with slight variations according to the discipline):

It discusses the results in response to the aim and in relation to other people's findings from the research literature.

It critiques the investigation, revealing any limitations or errors , where possible with suggestions as to how they might be overcome.

It might give implications for practice within the discipline. It may give recommendations for further investigations.

Conclusion

A conclusion in a short practical report is typically a single paragraph or even a single sentence. It may come at the end of the discussion or in a separate section with its own heading, just after the discussion.

The conclusion makes closing statements that draw together findings from the results and discussion.

References

By including a reference section, scientific reports allow readers to verify the information presented, trace the origins of ideas, and explore further reading on the topic. This adds credibility and transparency to the research process.

Consult your module handbook to identify the style of referencing you should adopt.

Find out more about referencing on our UniSkills webpages.

Appendices

Appendices are used to provide supplementary information that supports the main body of the report.

Expansion of Information: This could include detailed data tables, technical specifications, charts, graphs, or any other information that supports the main findings or arguments but might disrupt the flow of the main text.

Reference Material: Sometimes, reports require reference material that is necessary for understanding but not crucial to the main argument or findings. Appendices provide a space to include such material without cluttering the main text.

In-depth Analysis: Complex analysis, lengthy descriptions, or detailed methodologies can be placed in appendices to maintain readability while still providing readers with access to detailed information.

Regulatory or Compliance Requirements: In certain industries or academic fields, there may be regulatory requirements to include certain types of information, such as raw data or technical specifications, which can be included in appendices.

Activity: The video at the start asked you to jot down anything unfamiliar to you so you could commit to learn more either throughout this lesson or by accessing further resources. If you made some notes, revisit the list of things you wrote down and check out the list of resources below. These provide an excellent starting point to plug any gaps you might still have in relation to scientific writing. Challenge yourself to access the material on this list and work towards your goal of being a confident scientific writer.

The Craft of Scientific Writing is designed to help scientists write about their work clearly and effectively. The eBook includes many useful suggestions about approaching a wide variety of writing tasks as well as a concise guide to style and usage appropriate for scientific writing.

Science Research Writing for Non-Native Speakers of English is a useful eBook for all students and will give you the information, vocabulary and skills you need quickly and easily so that you can write confidently using the style and structure you see in your reading. It is a practical, rather than a theoretical book, and is intended as a fast do-it-yourself manual for researchers and scientists.

Academic Writing for International Students of Science is an eBook useful for all students covering key areas such as scientific style, effective sentence and paragraph structure, and coherence in texts and arguments. Throughout the book, a range of tasks offers the opportunity to put theory into practice. The explorative tasks allow you to see how language works in a real scientific context, practice and review tasks consolidate learning and help you to develop your own writing skills. Additionally, the reflective tasks encourage you to think about your own knowledge and experience.

Editing and Proofreading

Editing and proofreading are important academic skills, so it is essential to allocate time before you submit to check your work.

Editing and proofreading are often mistakenly thought to be the same process, but they offer two different strategies for improving your work.

Editing focuses on content, clarity, structure, and tone. Editing is part of the writing process, therefore should come before proofreading.

Proofreading means checking for any errors before you submit. This includes checking elements of your work such as spelling, referencing, and formatting.

Editing

Some of the different elements involved in editing include clarity, structure, relevance, and tone. Here are some useful questions to ask yourself in each of these categories.

Clarity: 1. Is your writing clear, concise, and easy to follow? 2. Are your arguments or points obvious? 3. Would someone who is not an expert in your subject area, still be able to understand the gist?

Structure: 1. Is your writing presented in a logical manner? 2. Does your work flow? 3. Is there anything missing or repeated?

Relevance: 1. Is what you have written relevant to your topic? 2. Have you answered the question? 3. Have you met all of your learning outcomes?

Tone: 1. Are you using an appropriate academic tone? 2. Is your writing in the correct voice? (3rd person for most academic writing, 1st person for reflective writing. 3. Have you used appropriate and relevant vocabulary?

Proofreading

Proofreading is an essential part of the academic writing process. It is an important skill which enables you to ensure your work is accurate, and can help you to retain valuable marks in your assignment. Proofreading fundamentally involves 2 main skills:

1. Spotting errors
2. Making corrections

Spotting errors

Use the 3 suggestions below as a checklist to identify what to consider when proofreading your work:

1. Spelling, punctuation, and grammar (sometimes referred to as SpaG) are key things to check when you proofread
2. Remember to check your references are accurate (including in-text citations, and your reference list at the end).
3. Is your formatting correct? Does if follow the guidance in your module or course handbook?

Spelling, Punctuation, and Grammar.

There are a wide range of spelling, punctuation, and grammar (SPaG) conventions to consider when proofreading. This section covers some of the most common SPaG errors, to help you to work out what to try and identify in your own work.

Spelling mistakes

Checking for spelling errors is important to ensure that your work is as accurate as it can be. Here are some examples of commonly misspelled words:

Incorrect	Correct	Why it's confusing
definately	definitely	The 2nd 'I' sounds like an 'a' when spoken aloud
seperate	separate	The 1st 'a' is often confused for an 'e' because of how it sounds aloud
enviroment	environment	The 'n' is silent when spoken aloud
accomodate	accommodate	Both 'c' and 'm' are double letters

Homophones

Homophones are words that sound the same (or very similar), and can easily be confused.

For example; there, their, and they're are homophones that can easily be mixed up.

There (spelled t,h,e,r,e) refers to a place, e.g., I'm visiting the new coffee shop over there.

Their (spelled t,h,e,i,r) means belonging to them, e.g., I like their style

They're (spelled t,h,e,y, apostrophe, r,e) is a contraction of 'they are', e.g., They're very busy today.

Commonly confused words

Words that are similar but easily confused will often not be picked up by a spellchecker. It is helpful to check whether you have used the correct word. Some examples of commonly confused words are:

- affect and effect
- advice and advise
- complement and compliment
- practice and practise

In UK English, the noun 'practice' and verb 'practise' are distinguished by the slight difference in spelling (with a 'c' and an 's' respectively).

For example:

1. Best practice is to document all decisions. (practice with a ‘c’, noun)
2. Essay writing becomes more fluent with practice. (practice with a ‘c’, uncountable noun)
3. She practised medicine internationally for the last ten years. (practice with an ‘s’, verb)

Proper nouns

A proper noun is a specific name for a particular person, place, or thing. A proper noun should always begin with a capital letter.

Incorrect: The eiffel tower was lauren’s favourite trip when she visited paris.

Correct: The Eiffel Tower was Lauren’s favourite trip when she visited Paris.

The words ‘Eiffel’, ‘Tower’, ‘Lauren’s’, and ‘Paris’ should all be capitalised.

Acronyms

Acronyms are formed from the initial letters of a name or phrase, and are often used in their own right.

Acronyms can be used in academic writing, but should be written out in full the first time they are mentioned, with the corresponding abbreviation following in brackets. Subsequently the abbreviation can then be used in your writing.

For example:
The governance and coordination of global health has been managed by the World Health Organisation (WHO) since its inception in 1948 (Gostin et al., 2024). The WHO also recognise maternal nutrition as one of the key priorities for public health globally (Killeen et al., 2022).

Abbreviations

An abbreviation is when a commonly used word is shortened. For example, most people are familiar with the word doctor being abbreviated to Dr.

Abbreviated personal titles such as this are fine to use in academic writing, however other forms of abbreviation are too informal.

For example, you might note things informally in a draft, e.g., 'This guidance incl. ref. to nat. policy', however your final version should read, 'This guidance includes reference to national policy'.

Punctuation

Punctuation marks are the **symbols** used in language to help the flow and comprehension of a sentence.

Some common punctuation marks to check for are commas (,), semi-colons (;), colons (:), full stops (.), apostrophes ('), exclamation marks (!), and question marks (?).

Find out more about how to proofread for punctuation in the UniSkills SPaG Guide.

Apostrophes

Apostrophes are used for 2 reasons:

1. To indicate possession (ownership)

Singular possession examples:

The student's book (one book belongs to one student)

The student's books (several books belong to one student)

Plural possession examples:

The students' book (one book belonging to several students)

The students' books (several books belonging to several students)

2. To mark contraction (letters or words omitted)

Contractions which are common in speech are not used in academic writing as it is important to maintain a formal tone.

Informal (e.g., speech)	Formal (e.g., academic writing)
The research doesn't show any evidence of improvement in children's reading age.	The research does not show any evidence of improvement in children's reading age.

Tenses

Remember to ensure that tenses are consistent within sentences and paragraphs.

Incorrect	The research examines three articles and found that one was not underpinned with clear evidence.
Correct	The research examined three articles and found that one was not underpinned with clear evidence.

The incorrect example moves from the present to the past tense, whereas the correct example remains in the past tense throughout.

Summary

The UniSkills Spelling, Punctuation, and Grammar (SPaG) Guide offers comprehensive information on a range of conventions, and how to proofread for them.

References

Checking that your referencing is accurate involves a few different elements. Here are some questions to ask yourself before you submit:

1. Have I consistently used the relevant **referencing system** for my course? (e.g., Edge Hill Harvard Style, APA, MHRA, OSCOLA, Vancouver)
2. Are all my **in-text paraphrases** and **quotes** accurately referenced? (e.g., correct spelling for names, appropriate use of 'et al.', page numbers for quotations, etc.)
3. Does my reference list include **all the sources** I have cited? (Ensure that the reader can easily find sources from your references)
4. Is every entry in my **reference list** also cited in the text? (Do not include any entries that haven't been cited)

Formatting

Always follow your module handbook or assignment guidance to ensure that you are formatting your work in the style required by your department.

Some things you may need to consider include; **font** and **font size**, **spacing**, **page numbers**. You may also be expected to include a **title page** or **cover page** depending upon the piece of assessment.

How to proofread

It is almost impossible to spot all of the errors in your own work. You will likely read what you think you have written rather than what you have actually written! Using a range of proofreading techniques and assistive technologies can help you to pick up any errors that you might have missed. Here are some suggestions for you to try:

A Fresh Take

A fresh re-reading can help to pick up any errors you were previously unable to spot. Asking a friend or family member to read through your work can also be a great strategy. This is usually more effective if they are unfamiliar with your subject area. Good academic writing should be clear enough for anyone to understand!

They should be able to help you identify:

- Any points that don't make sense
- Obvious spelling and grammar mistakes
- Formatting issues you may not have noticed (e.g., short paragraphs)

Remember that while it is great for a friend or family member to point out any errors or areas that don't make sense, they should not make those changes for you as that could potentially be classed as contract cheating (where a 3rd party does the work for you)!

If you don't have other people to read your work, the other way to get a 'fresh take' on it, is to finish a draft version with enough time to leave it completely for a few days (or longer if possible), and go back to it once you have had a good break from writing.

Listen

One of the most effective ways to proofread is to listen to your work rather than reading it. When you listen back to your work, your brain processes the words in a different way, and it is easier to hear things that you might not spot when reading, such as;

- Spelling errors
- When sentences are long and rambling
- When points don't make sense

Software

As an Edge Hill University student you have access to text-to-speech software like Read&Write12 which offers the option to listen to written text.

However, Word also has an in-built 'Read Aloud' feature. Navigate to the Review tab to find it, and select the 'Read Aloud' function to listen to your work.

Find and Replace

Word offers a range of other useful functions that can help you to proofread your work, for example Find and Replace (which sit in the Home tab).

Find

The find function can be helpful as a tool to check whether you have covered all the Learning Outcomes (LOs). By finding the key words from your title and LOs in the text you can identify whether you have covered everything, and if you have done so in enough depth.

If the key words are not coming up in the document, but you know you have covered the topic, this function might help you to identify where you can add those key words as signposts to the relevant content.

Find and Replace

The find and replace function is also useful for identifying and eliminating informal language like contractions. E.g., You can find 'don't' and replace with 'do not'. This function will make the changes throughout the whole document.

You might also want to use it if there are words you frequently misspell, or mistype. E.g. You can find the misspelling 'helath' and replace it with 'health'.

Editor

Editor is in-built in Word and helps to identify errors in spelling, grammar, and punctuation, as well as the conciseness of your writing.

- **Spelling** - remember to ensure that the proofing language is set to 'English (United Kingdom)'. You can do this by navigating to the Review tab, selecting 'Language' and 'Set Proofing Language' from the drop-down options.
- **Grammar** - the Editor function will help to identify if tenses are incorrect, and make suggestions about the appropriateness of the tone (e.g., whether it is too informal).
- **Punctuation** - Editor can help you to identify errors in punctuation, such as missing commas.
- **Conciseness** - this function will support your writing to be concise by suggesting that you eliminate unnecessary words (e.g., 'in order to' could just be 'to').

Remember to always use tools like Editor by exercising your own judgement. If undertaking the suggestions means the words no longer sound like your voice, or detract from the emphasis you are trying to make, you do not have to follow them!

Proofreading Checklist

You might find our downloadable **Proofreading Checklist** a helpful way to ensure you have covered all the elements covered in this section.

Why edit and proofread?

Spending time editing and proofreading enables you to ensure that you are submitting the best version of your work. Checking that your work is free from obvious errors, is clear and concise, and meets the assignment guidance, means that you care about the quality of work you produce.

Using these skills shows respect for both the writing process, and for the reader. Editing and proofreading also helps you demonstrate attention to detail, which is a lifelong skill. By submitting the best version of your work, you are creating a piece of assessment that also reflects your understanding, ability, and effort.

Useful Reading List

The following reference list will support you to develop your writing skills even further. All the sources are available via Discover More.

BARROW, C. and WESTRUP, R., 2019. Writing skills for education students [eBook]. London: Red Globe Press. Available from: https://edgehill.on.worldcat.org/oclc/1042350846 [Accessed 14 May 2024].

COTTRELL, S., 2019. The Study Skills Handbook [eBook]. 5th ed. London: Bloomsbury Publishing. Available from: https://edgehill.on.worldcat.org/oclc/1084318402 [Accessed 14 May 2024].

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ESTERHUIZEN, P. and HOWATSON-JONES, L., 2023. Reflective practice in nursing. 5th ed. London: SAGE Publishing Company.

GODFREY, J., 2013. The student phrase book: vocabulary for writing at university [eBook]. 2nd ed. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan. Available from: https://edgehill.on.worldcat.org/oclc/1140136870 [Accessed 14 May 2024]

JOHNS, C., ed., 2022. Becoming a reflective practitioner. 6th ed. West Sussex: Wiley.

PAYNE, E. and WHITTAKER, L., 2006. Developing Essential Study Skills. 2nd ed. Essex: Pearson Education Ltd.

Related Resources

Useful Links

This resource from Manchester Academic Phrasebank can help with the ‘phraseological ‘nuts and bolts’ of academic writing.'

You can find our other toolkits on your UniSkills webpages.

UniSkills blogs

UniSkills write regular blogs, including a monthly focus on library resources and academic skills. In these quick reads you can learn about useful resources, how to access them and their benefits to your studies. You might even find us exploring new ways of thinking!

Other Resources

Check out LinkedIn Learning for access to free, unlimited access to thousands of high quality online courses and video tutorials written by industry experts.

UniSkills Support at Edge Hill University

As well as our toolkits, there are many ways you can access support for your academic skills development. No question or query is too big or too small. Whether you are new to studying or need to refresh or develop skills, we have a range of options for you to access at both graduate and postgraduate taught level.

Webpages

Reach your potential and visit our UniSkills web pages. Find out more about the support designed to help you develop your academic skills and confidence at university and beyond. Whatever your subject or level of study, UniSkills has something to offer.

Workshops and webinars

UniSkills workshops and webinars are an opportunity for a deeper dive into a specific skill that will support you on your academic journey. Facilitated by our friendly and knowledgeable Academic Skills Advisors, these sessions provide an informal safe space where you will be supported alongside other students in a small group setting.

Appointments

All students are able to book a one-to-one appointment. Our experienced Academic Skills Advisors can help you develop your academic skills and strategies throughout your time at university. One-to-one support is available on a wide range of topics including academic reading, writing and referencing, finding information, and preparing your assignment for submission.

AskUs

For any questions across any of our library and learning services, you can Ask Us online.

Campaigns

Explore our year-round UniSkills campaigns to enhance your academic journey at Edge Hill. From pre-arrival prep to acing your exams, we've got something for everyone!

Keep in touch

Library and Learning Services Instagram

Make sure you're following us over on Instagram for all the latest Library and Learning Services news, events and support: @EHULibrary

You'll discover: weekly what's on stories; reminders about upcoming campaigns and events; fun, interactive polls and competitions; hidden treasures from our Archive; and reading for pleasure recommendations.

Library and Learning Services Blog

In the Library and Learning Services (LS) blog you'll find lots of information, ideas and support curated by a wide range of staff and students from across the service.

Browse through all our useful blogs via the Home tab or visit individual areas of interest via the sub-blog headings along the menu bar.

Your views count

Thank you for engaging with this toolkit.

We'd love to know what you thought, and you can share your feedback in our short UniSkills Toolkit Satisfaction Survey. The survey should take you no longer than five minutes to complete.

Your feedback helps us to continually improve our support - thank you!

You have now completed this UniSkills toolkit and can close the window. We hope you found it useful, and we look forward to continuing to support you with your academic skills development.