

*The Little Academic Writing Booklet*

*By*

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# CONTENTS

<b>1.</b>	<b>Introduction</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>2.</b>	<b>The Importance of Strategy</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>3.</b>	<b>Stages in the Assignment Writing Process</b>	<b>5</b>
	- Selecting a Topic/Title	5
	- Recognising the Demands of a question	7
	- Preparatory Reading and Research	8
	- Developing an Assignment Plan	11
	- Drafting and Revising the Assignment	12
	- Editing and Proof-reading the Final Draft	14
<b>4.</b>	<b>Writing Conventions</b>	<b>14</b>
	<b>Audit of Writing Skills</b>	<b>18</b>

## **1. Introduction**

This booklet is for students who will be required to write assignments at Masters level during their course of study. Its purpose is to help you to prepare to meet the academic writing requirements of a Masters qualification.

Everybody will have a different starting point. For some, it may be many years since you last completed a piece of academic writing. Others, fresh from undergraduate courses, may have plenty of recent experience. Some subjects provide frequent opportunities to write essay-type assignments; others provide little or none. A final consideration is that all subjects have their own writing conventions and requirements – the way we ‘do things’ in History or Science or Mathematics and so on. Few of you will have studied Education at higher education level before. This booklet, therefore, has three main objectives:

- ✓ To offer general guidance on reading and writing strategies that are likely to lead to success;
- ✓ To introduce the academic writing conventions and requirements of Education;
- ✓ To help you to judge how well-prepared you are for M-Level academic writing and to identify any action required.

Read this booklet before your course starts. At the end, you will be asked to audit your writing skills. On some courses, you will discuss the audit with your Personal Tutor who will help you to decide whether it would be helpful to: (i) attend a one-hour lecture where some of the ideas introduced in this booklet are developed in more detail; (ii) sign up for an academic writing workshop which explores their practical application.

You will need to print pages 4 and 18-20. If you choose to print the entire booklet, have a highlighter pen available to identify text which may be needed for future reference.

## **2. The Importance of Strategy**

Two key findings have emerged from discussions with former students about their approach to assignment writing:

- (i) Approaches vary enormously!
- (ii) Success, or lack of it, can usually be traced back to the approach adopted e.g. the order in which activities were undertaken and what a student did/failed to do at a particular stage.



**Smart preparation is the key to success.  
The order in which you complete your  
preparation and what you do at each stage  
matter!**

### **Task**

Before you go any further, reflect on your own approach to writing essay-type assignments. Start at the beginning with your choice of title. How do you go about selecting an assignment? What activities do you undertake subsequently and what is the typical order in which you complete them? List what you do in order.

Even if you can't remember the last time you wrote an assignment, it is still worth trying to work out the strategy you are likely to adopt when faced with this requirement.



### 3. Stages in the Assignment Writing Process

There are six stages in the writing process:

1. Selecting (or negotiating) a topic/title
2. Analysing the demands of a question
3. Preparatory reading and research
4. Developing an assignment plan
5. Drafting and revising the assignment
6. Editing and proof reading the final version.

Going through these stages systematically is one of the keys to success. Some of the stages do overlap. For instance, an assignment plan (stage 4) usually starts to take shape whilst reading and research are being undertaken (stage 3) and editing is a feature of drafting and revising. However, disrupting this natural sequence of events is a root cause of difficulties and often leads to poor performance. For instance, students who draw up their plan before they do anything else or students who complete their reading before they have analysed the question are setting themselves up to be less successful than they might have been.



**Consider your answer to the Task in the light of these stages.**

#### ***Stage 1: Selecting a Topic/Title***

How much time do you usually spend on this? Do you consider the options carefully taking different factors into account? During discussions with former students, many conceded that they made their choices quickly and instinctively. For many, choice of title was more of a gut reaction than an informed decision.

Personal interest is often the overriding consideration when choosing an assignment. This is sensible because you are likely to devote most effort to an assignment on a topic which interests you. However, there are other considerations that are worth making. For instance, at M-Level, familiarity with, and use of, relevant literature are key assessment

criteria against which your work will be judged. Therefore, before finalising your choice, it is worth developing a sense of the availability of appropriate literature. Are there plenty of books on the topic in the University library? How up-to-date are they? Are there any journals devoted to the topic? Are there any relevant professional associations which have published material? Are there any official or academically respectable websites which publish material on the topic? Use the guidance given during your library induction to do a preliminary check on questions like these before finalising your choice.

Below is a list of reputable academic and official websites. It will be useful for completing a preliminary check as well as for researching your chosen topic. Subject tutors will provide subject-specific recommendations.

<http://eppi.ioe.ac.uk> (Eppi-Centre [Evidence for Policy and Practice], based at London Institute of Education, carries out reviews of research findings.)

[www.dfes.gov.uk/](http://www.dfes.gov.uk/) (Department for Children, Schools and Families)

[www.standards.dfes.gov.uk](http://www.standards.dfes.gov.uk)

'Research Informed Practice' is a feature of the Standards site which was developed to meet the needs of teachers and other non-researchers. It is a source of information on academic research which has practical relevance, provided in the form of digests.

<http://www.qca.org.uk> (the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority)

<http://www.ofsted.gov.uk> (the Office for Standards in Education)

<http://www.gtce.org.uk> (the General Teaching Council for England. A feature of the GTCE's website is 'Research of the Month' (ROM).)

<http://www.teachernet.gov.uk>

[www.multiverse.ac.uk](http://www.multiverse.ac.uk)

[www.citzed.info](http://www.citzed.info)

<http://www.aaia.org.uk> (the Association for Achievement and Improvement through Assessment)

<http://www.behaviour4learning.ac.uk>

<http://www.nasen.org.uk> (National Association for Special Educational Needs)

<http://www.napce.org.uk> (National Association for Pastoral Care in Education)

<http://www.ttrb.ac.uk> (the Teacher Training Resource Bank is a portal for research on a wide range of topics.)

Other useful tools include the Educational Evidence Portal ([www.eep.ac.uk](http://www.eep.ac.uk)) which aims to bring together research and evidence for a professional audience and *Education Research Complete* which is a bibliographical and full text database covering scholarly research and information relating to all aspects of education. It provides indexing and abstracts for 1,500 journals and full text coverage for more than 750 journals. It is available from the Education subject pages <http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/services/library/main/tealea/socsciall/education/key/> and from the full list of Library databases.

### **Stage 2: Recognising the demands of a question**

Not all titles make the same intellectual demands so, as well as considering the inherent interest of the subject matter, it is worth considering what you will be required to do with material and whether this will allow you to play to your strengths. For instance, one question may ask you to evaluate whereas another may require you to express and justify a point of view. Each will require a different approach and emphasise different skills.



**This is important if you have previously received feedback suggesting that you might have been more successful if you had chosen a different question. Considering your choice more carefully should help you to avoid this charge in the future.**

Irrelevance is probably the most common cause of poor performance. Students who have researched a topic thoroughly, developing a sound understanding, sometimes do less well than they deserve because they have not answered the question. Analyse the question to ensure that you are clear about what is required. In particular, you need to identify:

- (i) the 'angle' or focus of a question. (Most topics are too broad to be addressed in their entirety so being able to identify the angle(s) is critical to success);
- (ii) how many parts there are to a question;
- (iii) instruction words which tell you what to do.



**Simply reading a question is not enough! You need to analyse its demands.**

## Instruction words – what they require

- DESCRIBE – provide a detailed account
- EXPLAIN – in addition, say how and why
- ANALYSE - break a subject down into its parts, exploring the nature of the parts and their relationships with one another
- EVALUATE - make judgements and justify them – weigh the evidence and reach informed conclusions
- CRITIQUE/CRITICALLY – provide a well-reasoned commentary (e.g. on a theory or a claim) – give your considered opinion backed up with evidence from reading/observations. (Although criticism does not necessarily entail finding fault, it does require a willingness to question, where appropriate, and not simply to accept things at face value).

**Note:** although it would be hard to write an assignment without describing and explaining, these skills are not highly valued at Masters level. Therefore, you need to describe and explain as concisely as possible so that you can devote most of your energies to the higher order activities of analysing, critiquing and evaluating.

### **Stage 3: Preparatory reading and research**

Reading serves different purposes. There are occasions when reading is undertaken purely for information. On these occasions, the reader is the human equivalent of blotting paper, absorbing content. At M-Level a different approach is required.

First, you need to extract from the text material which may be useful in your assignment: factual information, theories, concepts, research findings, pithy quotations and definitions of key terms that you will be using. Analysing the demands of the question before you start to read will give you a clear idea of what to look for.



Reading must be a *focused and purposeful* activity.

**This is important if you have previously received feedback suggesting that your work was ‘too general’ or ‘vague’. Identifying specific information and quotations at the reading stage**



**should help you to avoid this charge in the future.**

One of the main criteria by which M-Level work is judged is the ability to offer a critique of the material included. Reading critically is a prerequisite for writing critically because it is difficult to adopt a critical stance when writing if you have read passively, accepting material without question and without considering how it relates to other texts that you have studied. Does the text, for instance, advance a theory or report findings that conflict with those reported elsewhere? Be alert to recurring themes and findings in different sources and look for connections between different texts or with your own experience. Note areas where there are apparent contradictions or conflict. Identify evidence which could be used to support or refute assertions. How much weight should be attributed to the thesis of the text? For instance, what are the strengths and weaknesses of the methods used by the author? Are the findings based on very small or unrepresentative samples? Is the argument biased or flawed or a disguised assertion? Is it predicated on underlying assumptions?



**The first step in being able to write critically is to read critically. Avoid the blotting paper approach by adopting an *active, enquiring* approach to reading.**



**This is important if you have previously received feedback suggesting that your work was ‘too descriptive’. Reading critically should help you to avoid this charge in the future.**

Success also depends on the range and relevance of texts consulted. Aim to read a range of text types as appropriate to your topic: books, chapters, articles and reports from government sources or professional associations. The recommended reading list is a

sensible starting point. Reading texts in the order in which they were published may help you to develop a sense of how thinking has changed with time.

Students who perform poorly have often consulted few or no texts from the recommended list, relying instead on obscure or dated texts. Making a prompt start on reading avoids being one of the last students to visit the library and finding yourself left with texts that no one else wants! Use the library's recall system to keep popular texts circulating.

Remember, too, that there is often a copy of key readings available in the Learning Grid and that official publications (e.g. government reports), books and journal articles are increasingly available online.

Most areas of education are characterised by rapid development making it unwise to rely on dated texts (e.g. published a decade or more ago). Your reading list will identify earlier texts that have stood the test of time. Apart from these, it is best to use dated texts sparingly, focusing on recent publications.

The educational press (e.g. the *Times Educational Supplement* and the *Tuesday Guardian*) should not be the main source of reading. The educational press is used most effectively when it is used sparingly and for specific purposes e.g. to signal the strength of popular feeling on a topic that is in the news.



**This is important if you have previously received feedback suggesting that your work contained too little evidence of reading. Making an early start, and focusing on recent, recommended texts, should help you to avoid this charge in the future.**

The final thing to remember is the importance of keeping careful records *whilst* you are reading. Stage 5 explains the required referencing conventions. Have it to hand until you become familiar with the types of information you need to record for different types of references (e.g. quotations, books, articles etc). It is sensible to get into good habits from the outset rather than having to waste time searching for missing page references and dates at a later stage! Make sure that you use quotation marks for anything copied directly from the text as well as noting the page number.



**The quality of your writing is strongly influenced by the quality of your reading! A smart approach to reading is a cornerstone to success!**

#### ***Stage 4: Developing an assignment plan***

Your plan will probably start to take shape at the reading stage. Now it needs to be finalised by going back to your analysis of the question (Stage 2) to remind yourself of

- (i) the angle(s)/focus that you will need to tailor your answer to meet;
- (ii) how many parts need to be covered;
- (iii) the instruction words which indicate what you must do with the material you have gathered.

At this stage, it is important to consider how to organise your material. Most assignments will have a basic, three-part structure: introduction, main body of the text and conclusion. Organisation of the main text usually requires some further thought and sub-division into sections. How you organise this may be implicit in the title. For instance, a chronological order is especially useful where you are tracing the development of something over time e.g. the development of policy or practice. If a title requires you to express a point of view and justify it, you will probably want to organise your points in order of importance, placing the most powerful arguments first. If you are asked to 'discuss' or 'consider', you may adopt a thematic approach making sure that related ideas are dealt with together and in order. The diagram below lists the types of writing appropriate at each stage. You are unlikely to include all of them in every assignment that you write but they offered as a checklist for consideration.

### **INTRODUCTION**

Scene-setting: background/contextual information
Definition of key terms where the meaning cannot be taken for granted
Explanation of structure
Overview of line that will be taken (arguments)
Justification of choices (e.g. decision to focus on specific content and pay little attention to other content)
Thought-provoking opening quotation to engage reader's interest



## **MAIN TEXT**

Sub-divided into sections

- chronological: to show the sequence of events
- order of importance/relevance /frequency: in evaluations or to strengthen an argument
- thematic: related ideas dealt with together and in sequence (discussions)



## **CONCLUSION**

Draw together main ideas/ summarise thesis

Highlight key points

Clarify reasons for conclusions

Offer recommendations (where appropriate)

Pithy closing quotation to create a forceful ending

Paragraphs also have a structure.

## **SUGGESTED PARAGRAPH STRUCTURE**

- a. Topic sentence: introduces new subject matter
- b. Subsequent sentences: elaboration and development of the subject
- c. Provision of supporting evidence/illustration/example(s)
- d. Relate evidence/example back to topic sentence/demands of the question.

When you have finalised your plan, self assess it using points (i)-(iii) (above). For instance, if there is more than one part to the question, have you planned adequate coverage of all the parts? Have you overlooked something?

Have you complied with all of the instructions? If the title requires evaluation, have you planned to use evidence to make judgements, explaining the reasons for your conclusions? If the question asks for a discussion, have you planned to consider alternative points of view? Is all of the material strictly relevant? Eliminate irrelevance to allow a better use of the space.

How well does your plan meet the published assessment criteria for Masters work?



**A well thought out structure complements the content, enhancing the effectiveness of the argument.**



**This is important if you have previously received feedback suggesting that your work is muddled, disorganised or does not answer the question. Extra care at the planning stage should help you to avoid these charges in the future.**

### ***Stage 5: Drafting and revising the assignment***

Students frequently confess that they put writing off until close to the submission deadline, leaving themselves little or no time to revise their work. However, ideas, like wine, will develop and mature if there is time for this process to take place. The key to maturing your work is to start writing as soon as possible. Do not allow the act of starting to write to become a hurdle that you are reluctant to clear. If interesting ideas, questions and observations occur to you at the reading stage, make sure you record them as they may become part of your assignment. Don't worry about the way you express or organize ideas at this stage. It is more important to get the ideas down – you can work on other aspects later!

It is helpful to bear in mind what the finished product should show. It should demonstrate that you have made a careful study of the subject, becoming familiar with research and other relevant literature. Aim to write with authority, making informed comments that display a good understanding of the topic. Avoid sweeping generalisations e.g. 'Research

shows that ...'. Instead, refer to specific studies and explain precisely what they found. Absolute terms like 'always', 'every' and 'never' often feature in generalisations so they should be used with care. All assertions should be substantiated. The skill lies in selecting appropriate supporting evidence. It may be useful to approach this task in the same way that you would approach winning an argument! In both cases, success depends on making a persuasive case and selecting the best and most convincing evidence to support points. For instance, a claim about current practice in schools would be weakened by using supporting evidence published many years before. Well-chosen and detailed evidence also gives an assignment substance, guarding against the charge of vagueness and generality.

Although an element of description is unavoidable, especially when you are introducing a new topic or concept, avoid adopting a mainly descriptive approach. Description should be dealt with as succinctly as possible before moving on to provide the analysis, critique and/or evaluation which will gain marks. Remember that adopting a critical stance does not necessarily mean criticising something! It requires a thoughtful, enquiring approach and involves offering an intelligent commentary on what you have read. Be prepared to question e.g. biases and assumptions.

### ***Stage 6: Editing and Proof-reading the Final Draft***

There are two elements to this: editing for sense and meaning and proof-reading to detect careless and typographical errors (spelling, punctuation, grammar etc). You are more likely to spot errors that have escaped attention if you plan to complete this stage after a break so that you come to it fresh.



**Academic writing is a skill. Like all skills, it is capable of improvement.**

## **4. Writing Conventions**

Sub-headings are a useful structural tool, helping you to organise material and making it easier for the reader to navigate their way through the text. It is also helpful to explain the structure in the introduction and to use the opening sentence in a paragraph to introduce a

new topic. The closing sentence may also provide additional 'signposting' as in the following example.

Having discussed the main types of XXXXX, the underlying causes will be examined in the paragraphs which follow.

Note, too, the use of an impersonal style of writing ('the underlying causes will be examined') as opposed to the first person style ('I will now examine the underlying causes'). There are occasions when avoiding the first person can make writing sound awkward and strained, for instance, when providing an account of a personal experience. That aside, it is generally regarded as good practice to adopt the third person, using the first person sparingly.

### ***Referencing***

Evidence from source material needs to be referenced using the appropriate referencing conventions. Whilst some subjects use footnotes or end notes, the system used most commonly in Education is the Harvard referencing technique and this is the approach required for your M-Level work.

### ***In-text Referencing***

In the text of an assignment you will use two types of references: (i) references without quotation (e.g. to a research finding or theory) and (ii) quotations.

For references without quotation **two** pieces of information are required: author + date.

For quotations, **three** pieces of information are required: author, date + page reference.

See the examples below.

Summative assessment has been found to promote extrinsic rather than intrinsic motivation (Harlen, 2004).

It has been claimed that all teachers need to be 'assessment literate' (Gipps, 1994, p. 57).

Sometimes, you may wish to make reference to work that is quoted or referred to in a text you have read. This is known as **secondary referencing**. Its purpose is to make clear where you came across a reference to the work so you need to specify both authors. This means that an extra piece of information is required for each type of reference, as follows. For references without quotation **three** pieces of information are required: author of the referenced text, author of the text you read + date.

For quotations, **four** pieces of information are required: author of the quoted text, author of the text you read, date + page reference. See the examples below.

Wragg (in McIntyre, 2000) provides an incisive analysis of teacher effectiveness.

Best (in Somers, 2000, p. 23) claims that 'To fail to assess is to fail to teach'.

Your list of references at the end should contain the details of McIntyre or Somers not Wragg or Best.

Remember that accurate referencing requires good record-keeping at the reading stage.

Well-chosen quotations can strengthen an assignment but there are several pitfalls to avoid.

1. *Use of lengthy quotations.* Quotations should support and enhance what you are saying not replace it. Aim to use short, apt quotations – the shorter the better. Sometimes quoting a key word or phrase can be an effective way of highlighting its importance and strengthening your argument.
2. *Over-reliance on quotations.* Where quotations are over-used, there is a danger that your own voice becomes lost. Your own contribution needs to be clearly articulated.
3. *Plagiarism.* This arises when you use words from a source without quotation marks and without acknowledging the source. It is a form of cheating for which the penalties are severe so it must be avoided. (see p. 17 for further guidance.)

### ***End-of-text Referencing***

At the end of an assignment

1. Supply a full list of ALL the documents to which you have referred. This is known as a list of references. Include in the list ONLY texts that you have referred to in your assignment.
2. Arrange items in alphabetical order of authors' names.
3. Whereas you supplied limited information about the source in the text, FULL details are required in this list.

**For books, five** pieces of information are required: author/editor, date of publication, full title, place of publication and publisher as in the example below.

Filer, A. and Pollard, A. (2000) *The Social World of Pupil Assessment: Processes and Contexts of Primary Schooling*, London, Continuum.

**For chapters from books, eight** items of information are required: chapter author(s), date of publication, title of chapter, editor(s), title of book, place of publication, publisher and pages as in the example below.

Alexander, R. (1990) 'Partnership in Initial Teacher Education: Confronting the Issues', in Booth, M. and Wilkin, M. (Eds.) *Partnership in Initial Teacher Training*, London, Cassell, pp. 59-73.

**For journal articles, six** pieces of information are required: author, date of publication, full title of article, title of journal, volume plus issue number and pages as in the example below.

Biggs, J. (1998) 'Assessment and Classroom Learning: a Role for Summative Assessment?', *Assessment in Education*, Vol. 5, No.1, pp. 37-52.

**For material from a website four/five** items of information are required: author; date if given, title, web address, date item accessed as in the example below.

Wray, D. (undated) 'An Approach to Standard English' (Online article). Available at: <http://www.warwick.ac.uk/staff/D.J.Wray/Standeng.html>  
Accessed on 18 October 2006.

### **Cheating and Plagiarism**

One reason why correct referencing is essential is to avoid laying yourself open to the charge of plagiarism. Plagiarism is the use of other people's writing without proper acknowledgement. Tutors have various means at their disposal for detecting plagiarism and other forms of cheating. The penalty for these offences is always severe so guard against them by:

- (i) studying the relevant section of your course handbook and the university's website (<http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/services/gov/calendar/section2/regulations/cheating/>)
- (ii) consulting the tutor who will mark your work if you have any doubts about how the guidance applies to it.

**Please complete the writing audit now.**

## Audit of Writing Skills

Auditing your experiences and skills will help you to decide what action, if any, you need to take to enhance your skills. Tick all boxes that apply.

1. When was your most recent experience of academic writing (i.e. writing for an academic qualification)?

- within the last three years
- within the last 4 – 7 years
- 8 or more years ago

2. How frequently have you done the following types of writing?

Type of writing	Frequently	Occasionally	Rarely/ Never
Essay (e.g. piece of writing usually from an author's personal viewpoint)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Report (e.g. an account of a conducted experiment or a survey)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Creative writing (e.g. an imaginative piece of writing)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Literature review (e.g. a critical account of what has been published on a topic by scholars, researchers)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Thesis (e.g. a piece of writing usually involving personal research, written as part of university degree)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Summary (e.g. a concise description of material)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Statistical presentation (an account of numerical data)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Critique (e.g. an evaluation of a book, article, film in the light of specific issues and theoretical concerns)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

3. How successful were you on tasks requiring essay-type writing and critique?

- Most of my assignments were assessed as at least good
- Most of my assignments were assessed as at least satisfactory
- Some of my assignments failed at first submission
- Not applicable

4. How easy do you find the following aspects of academic writing?

	Very easy	Fairly easy	Some difficulties	Don't know
Recognising what a question/title requires	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Keeping work relevant throughout	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Structuring an assignment/organising material	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Writing an appropriate introduction/conclusion	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Making work sufficiently detailed and analytical	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Providing a critique of material included	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Providing apt illustrations of ideas	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Providing appropriate evidence to support claims	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Expressing ideas clearly and concisely and adopting an appropriate register	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Writing technically accurate English with correct grammar, spelling and punctuation	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Using the recommended referencing system	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

5. How frequently were academic writing skills identified as a reason for the success/failure identified in Question 3?

- Often
- Occasionally
- Rarely or never
- Not applicable

6. Overall, which of the following statements best describes your view of yourself as a writer of academic assignments

- I find most aspects of writing easy and have been mostly successful
- I have been fairly successful but I recognise some weaknesses that I need to address

- I find some aspects of writing difficult and these have caused me to be less successful than I might otherwise have been
- I have little (or no recent) experience of writing essay-type assignments and find the prospect daunting

Action required

- None
- Develop targets focused on weaknesses/areas for development
- Attend lecture on Academic writing
- Sign up for Academic Writing Workshop
- Other (specify)

Targets, action plan and/or comments