

Academic Writing

**A Basic Survival Guide for
Students**

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INTRODUCTION

Don't panic. This is the golden rule of good academic writing for students whether you are a final-year undergraduate or postgraduate student writing your dissertation, a first-year student with your essay deadline looming, or preparing for end-of-year exams. Achieving a good standard of academic writing is often hard work, but with proper planning for assignments, active attention to developing your writing skills, and – most important – *practice* you will gradually improve your capacity to write high-quality essays and other assignments, until it is difficult to recall the challenge of writing your first academic essay.

It is a peculiar characteristic of everyday life in the twenty-first century that anyone with a smartphone can easily access a wealth of facts about a given topic in politics and international studies. This degree of access to specialised information is unprecedented in human history. However, as this basic survival guide for students explains, simply having access to facts does not make for critical thinking, which is an essential condition for good academic writing. Gradually building and accumulating your own knowledge about a specific field of study is essential in order to be able to separate facts from incomplete truths or untruths, and relevant information from misinformation.

Knowledge – in the sense of enhanced learning, critical awareness, and in-depth understanding – is not simple answers to closed questions that can be quickly looked up online (and then forgotten) and is much more than a list of facts or information about a certain topic. Fostering an open mind and an ability to move beyond your own preconceptions in order to ‘suspend judgement’ about an issue is a fundamental criterion for good academic research and, therefore, good academic writing. The availability of facts and information about politics and international studies is now unprecedented (and so too is the volume of incomplete truths, distortions, and misinformation). However, in order to fully understand, analyse, and explain complex political issues students need to be able to critically evaluate the different sides of an issue and to assess various forms of relevant evidence, to place issues and ideas in their wider context, to apply alternative theoretical models and concepts to gain increased analytic traction, perhaps even to engage in ‘theory building’ in an attempt to expand knowledge and challenge conventional wisdom and assumed truths.

Developing your academic writing skills does not occur naturally and involves sustained individual effort and persistence. It is common for university students to progress through their undergraduate degree – or even postgraduate study – lacking a clear grasp of what is expected in academic writing, and how their own writing

skills might be improved. One reason for this is that students often receive what appear to be opaque comments on their assessed work from university lecturers. This may include appropriate feedback exhorting a student to improve their analytical skills, the clarity of their writing, the structure of their essays, or to more critically reflect on the sources they use. But this is often not accompanied by practical advice on how to improve in these areas of essay writing. This short introduction to academic writing aims to help bridge the gap between the areas identified for improvement in essay feedback, and practical techniques to realize this improvement. In short, it aims to give you a brief overview of the essential 'tools of the trade' in academic writing, by providing a basic survival guide for students taking politics and international studies modules at all levels of undergraduate and postgraduate study.

DEVELOPING GOOD RESEARCH SKILLS

- Read widely from a range of sources and perspectives
- Evaluate data and evidence with care

It is common for many students to look blank whenever the topic of ‘research skills’ is raised. The concepts and practices associated with high quality research in university study often remain obscure for many students, and especially for those at the start of their degree program. Yet developing good research skills is an essential component of good academic writing. This involves enhancing your ability to access, evaluate, and use numerous sources of information in a relevant way. The starting place for students’ research is the existing scholarly literature on a specific topic within the study of politics and international studies. Beyond this, a range of other sources may be relevant depending on the nature of the assignment and the topic being addressed, which could include media sources, publicly-available speeches, documents, reports, working papers, conference papers, and so on. Finding the right balance here can often be tricky. In a large essay assignment, for example, this may involve a selection of the existing academic literature combined with additional sources of primary and secondary information or data.

Within politics and international studies, an essay that evaluates the challenges and opportunities for the reform of an international institution such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) should begin with the existing debates in the academic literature on IMF reform. In addition, it would be important to carefully examine relevant documents the IMF has produced, many of which are publicly available on the organization’s own website or in the university library. The intellectual value of these sources – and how they can be used effectively – will vary depending on the authors.

Working Papers on IMF reform written by staff members tell a different part of the story – from a different perspective – than formal policy papers/reports by staff. These, in turn, tell a different story in contrast with formal speeches given by the head of the organization, the IMF Managing Director, or IMF Press Releases that represent the organization’s official view on an issue. Documents, speeches, and position papers may also be available from national institutions or agencies within states, such as the Bank of England, the UK and US Treasuries, the Federal Reserve, the US Congress, the People’s Bank of China, and so on with respect to an essay on the topic of IMF reform. Likewise, multilateral forums such as the Group of Twenty or the Intergovernmental Group of Twenty-Four on International Monetary Affairs and Development as well as non-governmental organisations such as the Bretton

Wood Project, Oxfam, and ActionAid have statements and communiqués relating to reform of the IMF that are available to download from the web. It would also be important to consider differences in the perspectives of governments and official agencies from developed countries compared with those in developing or least developed countries. Not all of these sources need to be incorporated within an undergraduate essay – especially if this is a relatively short assignment of 2,000–3,000 words – but you will not be able to judge what is and what is not relevant or important to include if you do not first look at these different sources of information in your attempts to piece the story together.

Politics and international studies students also tend to believe (often incorrectly) that they *must* include hard data/statistics in their written work to gain a good grade. In some cases the careful use of descriptive statistics or other sources of quantitative data can potentially help to strengthen the empirical foundations of an essay. If, for example, you are addressing an essay question on the impact of the 2007 US subprime crisis on mortgage defaults, you will be expected to provide some data to illustrate this relationship (which is often much easier to communicate via a simple graph rather than attempting to incorporate a long series of numerical figures in the main body of your essay). Likewise, if you are studying the aggressive use of monetary policy in different countries to combat the effects of the 2008-09 global financial crisis, you will probably find it easier – and it will be more useful for the reader – if you provide a snapshot that can illustrate this, such as a graph comparing interest rate changes among the economies you are investigating. Indeed, it can often prove difficult to discuss major political events, crisis episodes, or processes of fundamental change and transformation without making some attempt to quantify the scale of the political phenomena you are examining.

At the same time, the utility of statistical datasets and indicators for the purpose of analysing, evaluating, interpreting, and explaining real world phenomena depends on their conceptual and empirical validity – how well they ‘capture and describe correctly the world’. A simple but fundamental point to note here, as Gary Goertz observes, is that ‘*all datasets rest on concepts*’ and ‘It is not uncommon for there to be disconnects between conceptualization and measurement’. This is especially challenging with respect to the conceptual definition and measurement of complex phenomena such as poverty, economic growth, inequality, terrorism, democracy, and many other concepts that students will routinely engage with and use in your studies.¹ This calls for caution in how readily students of politics and international

¹ Goertz, Gary (2020) *Social Science Concepts and Measurement*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, pp. 5-8.

studies accept existing statistical data and indicators at face value, even those that are widely considered authoritative and based on common international standards.²

It is often the case that poor use of statistics – or, in the worst cases, simply slotting in some numbers because you believe this is important for its own sake – weakens the quality of an essay rather than strengthening it. A general rule of thumb here is that hard data/indicators/statistics must be used carefully and clearly, they should fit the topic at hand, and any graphs should be clearly explained in the text. Another option – which is seldom used by undergraduates but can prove more useful than loading your essay with statistics – is to create your own illustrative diagram(s) to trace the chain of causation with respect to a specific issue, or to show how influence is exercised in a certain sphere of politics and international studies.

There are a wide range of sources of information available for you to use in your written assignments at university, which are too numerous to provide an exhaustive list here. At a minimum you should aim to develop proficiency with using the following sources: the library catalogue and other databases to search for relevant books, edited volumes, and journal articles from the scholarly literature; and open-access sources, including both local, national, regional, and international institutions where this is appropriate, as well as the websites of non-governmental organizations, companies, research institutes and thinktanks, and so on. Google Scholar (<http://scholar.google.co.uk>) is an exceptionally useful site that can help you identify relevant academic books/articles on a particular topic, although it does not include all the publications that may be useful to you (some of which may not be available through the library).

A note of caution is important here: do not expect to be able to type your essay question into Google and instantly find an article or book that directly addresses this. Students sometimes struggle to grasp that research does not involve simply finding out what someone else has written that directly addresses your topic or question and then finding a way to reproduce this through paraphrasing and direct quotes. Rather, to answer essay questions you will need to first disaggregate and interpret the question and to search for relevant sources of information on the distinct component parts of the question. The trick then becomes how carefully and creatively you can weave these (sometimes quite different) literatures together to coherently address the question you have selected. It is always important to read as widely and thoroughly as possible around a topic for any written assignment at university. By undertaking comprehensive *active reading* you will also be building your research and critical thinking skills – thereby killing multiple birds with one stone.

² Daniel Mügge and Lukas Linsi (2020) ‘The National Accounting Paradox: How Statistical Norms Corrode International Economic Data’. *European Journal of International Relations*, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354066120936339>.

HOW TO BE A GOOD STUDENT

- Remain consistently engaged throughout the course
- Avoid false shortcuts

Students occasionally report the incorrect but fervently-held belief that following a ‘cheat sheet’ of shortcuts is the best route to a high mark in their university studies – or, more commonly, that shortcuts provide the best route to a ‘respectable’ grade, without requiring you to put in the hard yards in terms of research, planning and organization, and writing, editing, and proof-reading. This is wrong. In every case, you will achieve more in terms of learning outcomes relating to academic writing skills by remaining consistently engaged throughout a course.

Key characteristics of good university students include:

- Attendance at all lectures/seminars
- Full participation in seminars
- Active reading
- Clarity in writing style

To say that **attendance** at all lectures and seminars is important for essay writing should be stating the obvious, but it is often surprising that a minority of students – especially in large undergraduate courses – fail to regularly attend their scheduled classes, especially close to essay submission time. This is a grave mistake. Through attending all lectures and seminars you are likely to pick up extra hints and tips on completing course assignments in general, and you will have further opportunities to gain answers to your specific questions on how to complete assignments and how you might improve the quality of your work. More broadly, attendance at lectures – *even when the subject doesn’t directly relate to the essay topic you are planning to address* – helps to provide greater context that will help you develop a more comprehensive understanding of the course content. This is a major benefit when it comes to completing written assignments.

Like regular attendance, full **participation** in seminars is a must for students seeking to enhance their academic writing skills. Not only will you get more out of the course in general, but active participation in class debates, discussions, and question and answer sessions will help to round out your understanding of the key concepts and issues a course focuses on, thereby enabling you to develop a wider and deeper repertoire of skills that can be drawn upon for academic writing assignments. Active participation in seminars will help you to develop your critical thinking skills

– the same skills that are essential to good academic research and writing. It is a truism to state that students who do not regularly attend lectures and seminars, or fail to actively participate in classes, must work harder to achieve the same grades as those who do.

University students always face significant pressures on their time. It is important to try to strike a balance between your personal life and your university studies, although most students find that the demands of university study often dominate their schedule. As a result, it can be tempting to skimp on completing the regular recommended/required readings for a course, or to skip them entirely for those topics that are not directly related to the essay question you are likely to select. Again, this is a mistake. Regular completion of required course readings helps to broaden your understanding of the key concepts, issues, and debates in a subject, all of which is essential for good academic writing even when the essay question you choose to address is more specific. Students who do not complete the regular readings also have to work harder to achieve the same quality in their assignments as those who do.

It is important not to simply skim readings or to read passively, **active reading** is essential (see below for further advice on how to read *actively*). Regular active reading for a course will give you a broader and deeper *holistic* understanding of a subject, while also spreading the workload more gradually and evenly across the term rather than trying to cram this into a few days when an assignment is nearly due. In addition, active reading helps students develop their writing skills through increasing familiarity with academic writing norms, including language styles, techniques of structuring a discussion, ways of mounting an argument, the appropriate use of supporting evidence, and so on.

When you come to the process of actually sitting down and writing an essay or other assignment – having completed your research and collated your notes – it is essential to be clear in your writing to help you communicate your ideas as persuasively and logically as possible. Achieving **clarity** in your writing style will help you to avoid the use of everyday colloquial language that may not be suitable for formal academic writing, as well as the use of flowery and complicated prose (see the extract below from Strunk and White's *The Elements of Style* on the virtues of clarity of expression).

Beware of false shortcuts, which should be avoided at all costs. Examples of these include using data/figures/graphs for their own sake in the hope of receiving a better grade simply because you have 'hard data', using flowery language and complex terms for their own sake in the hope of appearing to be more clever than you are, or extensively citing a lecturer's own publications in the hope of achieving grade inflation via flattery. Other common errors that must be avoided at all costs include:

reliance on easy access sources (such as introductory textbooks, course lectures/seminars, web pages, and especially sourcing information from Wikipedia, which is always obvious to the trained eye) at the expense of more relevant and detailed scholarly texts; cobbling together information for your essays from course lectures without conducting wider research, which represents intellectual laziness; and over-reliance on direct quotes without sufficient explanation of your own, or without translating other authors' ideas into your own words to demonstrate that you have fully understood them.

To be clear: good students do not take shortcuts when it comes to academic writing. Instead, you should organize your research and writing schedule carefully, well in advance of assignment deadlines, and work consistently to develop a high quality of written expression and a comprehensive understanding of the subject matter. You must also be prepared to work independently – writing is, by its nature, a solitary activity. Do not expect your lecturer or seminar tutor to tell you what theories to use, what your argument should be, what evidence to collect, or how to analyse and interpret your data. These are areas where you must put in the hard yards to develop your own critical thinking, research, and writing abilities, which is the purpose of university education. Treat class discussions about assignments and essay writing, or one-to-one meetings with seminar tutors, as an opportunity to report on your progress and your plans to complete assignments.

ACTIVE READING

It is important to *read actively* in order to take in and process complex information, to familiarize yourself with unknown terms (which you will subsequently need to understand for essays/class discussion), and to organize your notes in order to avoid having to re-read texts later on. A key task for students of politics and international studies at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels is to *build your academic vocabulary*, to increase your familiarity with – and understanding of – specialised terms commonly used in the field. Among other things, expanding your academic vocabulary will help to improve your ability to conceptualise, analyse, interpret, and explain complex political phenomena and to answer questions in a more robust and comprehensive fashion. One of the best ways to expand your academic vocabulary is to fully engage with both the required and supplementary academic sources for a specific module, and to do so by reading *actively*.

Keep a learning journal

Many students find it helpful to collect their notes from readings, observations, thoughts, definitions of key concepts, and other useful materials from the weekly readings and class seminars as well as research for essay assignments in a dedicated learning journal. For some students it is easier to keep a learning journal using online platforms/digital software, while others prefer to keep a hard copy learning journal in a notebook. A learning journal will encourage you to routinely reflect upon the source material you read each week for a module, and will make it easier to expand your subject-specific knowledge of key concepts and to improve your familiarity with relevant academic vocabulary.

How to read actively using a learning journal:

- Check the reading list and ensure that you know before you begin *why* you are reading a particular text.
- List all **unfamiliar** words or terms, then look up and *write down* the definitions.
- Write down your version of the author's key argument (and be sure to **organize** your notes carefully to save time searching for material). This helps to emphasize key points in your mind and will make it easier to recall later.

- Identify the subtopics or themes in the article or book, and design a question that you would ask for each (be sure to write such questions down), this will help to keep your mind focused on the material.
- Indicate what other ideas the reading **substantiates**, **contradicts**, or **amplifies**. Think about how the reading fits in with material covered earlier in the course – what are the key points on which authors agree or disagree? Do you find one author’s explanation more compelling than another author’s explanation, and, if so, why?
- Summarise your reactions and overall evaluation of the text.

Write down any questions that you might have, based on the readings, which you can raise in subsequent class discussions. No matter how straightforward your questions might seem to be, you can be sure that they are likely to have occurred to other students as well.

CLARITY OF EXPRESSION

Students often fail to appreciate the importance of achieving clarity in academic writing. Developing a clear and concise writing style will enable you to communicate your key ideas and points of discussion with greater analytic precision, and to present a more coherent and compelling overarching argument in your writing. The following extract from William Strunk and E.B. White's excellent short guide on writing style and grammar *The Elements of Style* neatly illustrates the significance of this:

Clarity is not the prize in writing, nor is it always the principal mark of a good style. There are occasions when obscurity serves a literary yearning, if not a literary purpose, and there are writers whose mien is more overcast than clear. But since writing is communication, clarity can only be a virtue. And although there is no substitute for merit in writing, clarity comes closest to being one. Even to a writer who is being intentionally obscure or wild of tongue we can say, "Be obscure clearly! Be wild of tongue in a way we can understand!" Even to writers of market letters, telling us (but not telling us) which securities are promising, we can say, "Be cagey plainly! Be elliptical in a straightforward fashion!"

Clarity, clarity, clarity. When you become hopelessly mired in a sentence, it is best to start fresh; do not try to fight your way through against the terrible odds of syntax. Usually what is wrong is that the construction has become too involved at some point; the sentence needs to be broken apart and replaced by two or more shorter sentences.

Muddiness is not merely a disturber of prose, it is also a destroyer of life, of hope: death on the highway caused by a badly worded road sign, heartbreak among lovers caused by a misplaced phrase in a well-intentioned letter, anguish of a traveller expecting to be met at a railroad station and not being met because of a slipshod telegram. Think of the tragedies that are rooted in ambiguity, and be clear! When you say something, make sure you have said it. The chances of your having said it are only fair.³

³ Strunk, William and E.B. White (2000) *The Elements of Style*, fourth edition, p. 79. New York: Longman.

GOOD ACADEMIC WRITING

- Explain your choices clearly
- Keep in mind the important distinction between *descriptive* and *critical* writing

It is essential to spend extensive time revising and proof-reading a piece of academic writing before submitting it in order to effectively iron out basic errors relating to spelling, punctuation, syntax, and grammar. A separate process of proof reading is also vital to improve the overall intellectual coherence of your writing, and to refine and enhance the persuasiveness of your argument.

Explain choices clearly

Academic writing involves the author making choices about what to include and what to exclude, which points, facts, information, and theories are highly relevant, which are somewhat relevant, and which – while interesting – may not be relevant or necessary to discuss in an essay on a certain topic. You should aim to explicitly explain and justify your choices in detail, based on clear and logical reasoning. For each essay or dissertation chapter that you write, it is important that the reader understands immediately why you focus on Y and not Z, why you include A, B, and C in that order (rather than C, B, and then A), or, indeed, why you choose to discuss A, B, and C at all rather than D, E, and F.

Logical coherence and transition

The narrative of your writing should proceed in a logical and coherent fashion, with a clear and easy-to-understand transition from one point to another. There should never be a logical break in the narrative where the reader is left to wonder why – and how – you go from talking about one topic to discussing another that might seem to have little to do with the former. When there are clear reasons for a transition from one point to another, these should be explained as cogently and persuasively as possible. The need to justify and explain your choices will also help you to identify when and where you may make jumps that require the structure of a paragraph – or of an entire essay or dissertation chapter – to be reordered or otherwise altered.

Facts and arguments versus opinions and assumptions

It should always be made clear to the reader:

1. When you are discussing points and information that are widely regarded as ‘factual’ statements in relation to a specific subject matter.
2. When you are presenting other scholars’ opinions about a topic.

3. When you are discussing the conventional wisdom in the existing literature about a topic, which, while broadly shared, is not fact and may be incorrect.
4. When you are articulating your own analysis and arguments, rather than representing other authors' ideas and arguments.

Critical writing⁴

It is common for academic feedback on student writing to focus on the need to engage more critically with the source material. Typical comments from lecturers are: 'too descriptive', or 'not enough critical analysis'. Critical writing is an essential part of good academic writing, and it is important to understand the difference between critical and descriptive writing, and to put this into practice in your written work.

What is critical writing?

The most characteristic features of critical writing are:

1. A clear and confident refusal to accept the conclusions of other writers without evaluating the arguments and evidence that they provide.
2. A balanced presentation of reasons why the conclusions of other writers may be accepted or may need to be treated with caution.
3. A clear presentation of your own evidence and argument, leading to your conclusion.
4. A recognition of the limitations in your own evidence, argument, and conclusion.

What is descriptive writing?

The most characteristic features of descriptive writing are that it will describe something but will not go beyond an account of what appears to be there.

For example, a certain amount of descriptive writing is needed to establish:

1. The setting of the research.
2. A general description of a piece of literature.

⁴ Extract reproduced from Student Learning Development (2009) *A Guide to Critical Writing*. Student Learning Development, University of Leicester.

Available at: <https://www2.le.ac.uk/offices/ld/resources/writing/writing-resources/critical-writing> (accessed 3 July 2018).

3. The list of measurements taken.
4. The timing of the research.
5. An account of the biographical details of a key figure in the discipline.
6. A summary of the history leading up to an event or decision.

The difference between descriptive writing and critical writing

With descriptive writing you are not developing argument; you are merely setting the background within which an argument can be developed. You are representing the situation as it stands, without presenting any analysis or discussion.

Descriptive writing is relatively simple. There is also the trap that it can be easy to use many words from your word limit simply providing description. In providing only description, you are presenting but not transforming information; you are reporting ideas but not taking them forward in any way. An assignment using only descriptive writing would therefore gain few marks. With critical writing you are participating in the academic debate. This is more challenging, and risky. You need to weigh up the evidence and arguments of others, and to contribute your own.

To write critically, you will need to:

1. Consider the quality of the evidence and argument you have read.
2. Identify key positive and negative aspects you can comment upon.
3. Assess their relevance and usefulness to the debate that you are engaging in for your assignment.
4. Identify how best they can be woven into the argument that you are developing.

A much higher level of skill is clearly needed for critical writing than for descriptive writing, and this is reflected in the higher marks it is given.

Creative essay writing

The five stages of essay writing include: (1) interpreting the question; (2) research; (3) planning; (4) writing; and (5) revision. At each stage it is important to think creatively about how to design, research, plan, and write your essay. How to write a 'creative' academic essay can be a mystifying proposition for many students, especially if your previous education concentrated on exam-based methods of

assessment rather than essay assignments. By incorporating these basic pointers you can enhance your ability to produce compelling and creative essays.

1. Creative introductions

Craft your introduction around an essay topic and *map the debate* by distinguishing between multiple threads in the existing literature.

2. Creative analysis

Break down key concepts to increase their analytic leverage. For example, rather than using a dichotomous understanding of state ‘influence’ (whereby states either have influence or do not), *unpack* the concept into types based on forms and degrees of influence. Avoid limiting the scope of your analysis by basing it on a narrow range of sources that simply reproduce the conventional wisdom in existing literature.

3. Creative theory

Draw on a wide range of sources to ‘selectively build’ a theoretical framework, tailored to how you interpret an essay question. Avoid relying on ‘great minds’ or ‘past masters’ to provide easy answers, and do not present caricatures of complex theories.

4. Creative arguments

Draw on a wide range of sources to develop an argument, tailored to how you interpret the essay question. Avoid relying on one ‘great book’ or ‘seminal article’ on a subject as a substitute for your own argument.

5. Creative conclusions

Explain why your findings matter and integrate the key points developed in the essay with the larger debate(s) articulated in the introduction. Avoid pedestrian conclusions that simply repeat whole sentences from the essay.

Constructing an argument

An essential feature of good academic writing is that it should present a clear argument, which directly connects to the wider topic of an essay and the specific question that is being addressed. Short undergraduate essays, longer postgraduate essays, and full dissertations all require an overarching main argument. The absence of a clear, cogent, and compelling argument in a piece of academic writing is like a car without wheels, it is not going anywhere for the simple reason that it is unfit for purpose.

In most instances, the specific terrain on which you will seek to develop an argument should be mapped out at the start of an essay. The argument will then be gradually developed throughout the main body of your essay from your use of theory, empirical

analysis, and the evaluation and interpretation of the findings of your research. Another way to put this is to say that your *argument determines the structure* of your writing, because you will develop and elaborate on the main reasons for your argument in the different sections of your essay (supported by a critical evaluation of relevant evidence), in order to persuade the reader of your overall position. As one university's guide on essay writing suggests:

Academic essay writing is persuasive. You are expected to take a position and present an argument in order to convince the reader of your views. Arguing for a position goes beyond simple description or the presentation of a series of facts. It means understanding the question, engaging with the debate and using evidence critically.⁵

This does *not* mean that students are being asked to simply pick a position at random (or based on preconceived personal opinions) and to subsequently 'cherry pick' evidence that confirms that position. As noted above, critical writing (and critical *thinking*) involves careful consideration of the quality of the evidence and argument you have read – and your readings should be drawn from all sides of the larger academic debate around a certain topic. Constructing a persuasive argument, therefore, involves developing an open-minded, imaginative ability to move beyond your own individual biases and preconceptions, and 'suspending judgement' in order to explore all the relevant issues and evidence available to comprehend a given topic.⁶

Paraphrasing and direct quotes

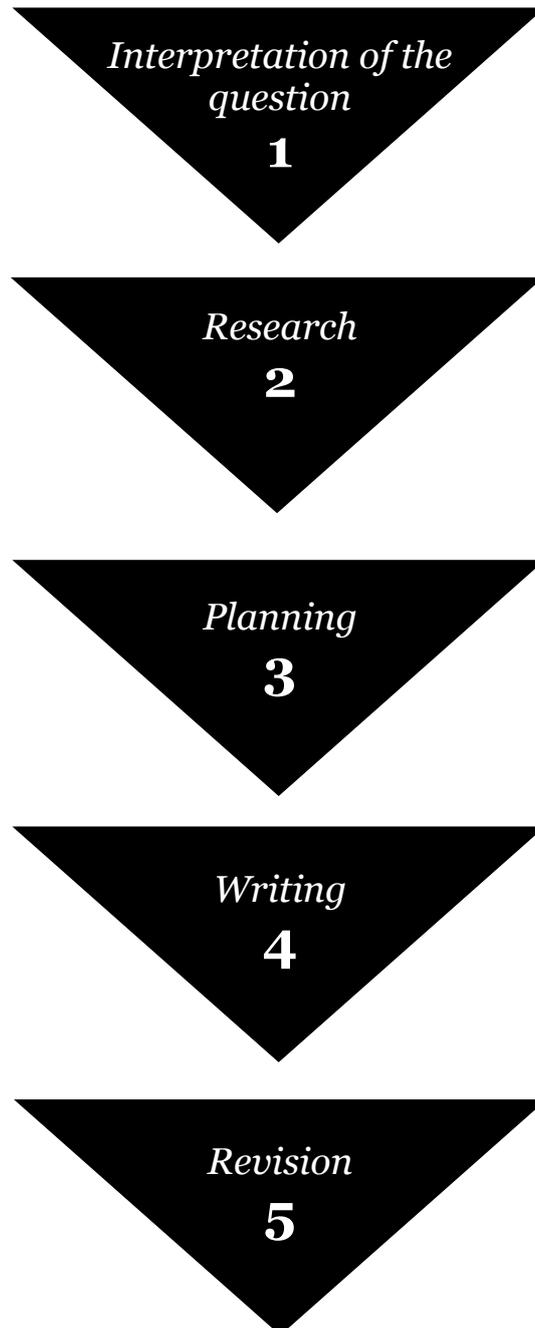
Use direct quotes sparingly, and instead paraphrase to demonstrate that you understand an author's ideas. A common misconception among students is the belief that the use of extensive direct quotes in an essay is indicative of good research and writing skills, or even substitutes for an argument and provides self-evident support for your case. This view is categorically incorrect. Direct quotes should be used *sparingly* and to achieve a clear purpose. There is one over-riding reason for paraphrasing (putting another author's ideas in your own words), rather than simply slotting in a direct quote from the books and journal articles you have read for your essay research: correct and careful paraphrasing indicates to the reader that you clearly comprehend the subject you are talking about and the points another author makes (or doesn't make, as the case may be). Conversely, overuse of direct quotes as space-fillers or substitutes for your own ideas and analysis suggests that you *do not* have a clear grasp of other authors' arguments, or even of the topic on which you are writing.

⁵ ANU Academic Skills and Learning Centre (2017) *Essay Writing*, p. 1. Australian National University. Available at: www.anu.edu.au/students/academic-skills/writing-assessment/essay-writing (accessed 17 January 2019).

⁶ Greetham, Bryan (2001) *How to Write Better Essays*, pp. 178-9. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Direct quotes are most likely to be useful: (1) for particularly good pieces of prose (some sentences, like the famous lines from Franklin D. Roosevelt's Infamy Speech in 1941 or terms such as George W. Bush's initial reference to an 'Axis of Evil' in 2002 are better used as direct quotes rather than paraphrased for this reason); and (2) if quotes provide one of your sources of evidence. If, for example, you are writing an assignment on the impact of a specific World Bank President on the World Bank's development policies and practices, then direct quotes from speeches delivered by the World Bank President might provide a key source of your evidence that an individual actor holds certain views and has pursued a particular agenda with respect to development policy. Another example is an essay that examines political discourse and debates over fiscal austerity policies, where quotes from leading politicians and policymakers might provide useful evidence of the rhetorical strategies used to legitimate (or to contest) cuts to government expenditure and public services. Even when deployed as sources of evidence, however, it is usually wise to use direct quotes sparingly and only to achieve a clear purpose.

THE FIVE STAGES OF ESSAY WRITING⁷



⁷ Greetham, Bryan (2001) *How to Write Better Essays*, p. 2. Basingstoke: Palgrave.

HOW TO ORGANIZE AN ESSAY

- An essay structure should include an introduction, a main body organized in thematic sections, and a conclusion
- The main body of your essay should follow a clear and compelling logic

Correct structuring of the different sections of an essay is essential for achieving a logical analysis and for organizing a comprehensive discussion of complex phenomena, as well as for the clear and persuasive communication of your own ideas and arguments. For many students encountering academic writing for the first time, however, this slippery notion of ‘structure’ – and how to go about correctly structuring a written assignment such as an essay, a dissertation, an exam essay, or a shorter written assignment such as a briefing paper – is shrouded in mystery. Understanding how to organize a piece of academic writing well is not a closely-guarded secret – quite the opposite in fact, there are numerous sources of university support and countless textbook guides on academic writing that provide detailed explanations of how to structure your written work to achieve maximum impact and quality. Nevertheless, it is important to recognize that the organization and design of written university assignments, like most components of academic writing, refers to a more sophisticated and time-intensive process of organizing ideas and information compared with what you may be familiar with from your previous education (including A levels).

A written piece of academic work such as an essay assignment can be thought of as similar to a decent three-course meal at your favourite restaurant: it will have an appetizer (your introduction); a main course (the body of your essay); and a dessert which rounds out your meal (your conclusion). The first stage in this process – the ‘appetizer’ – is your *introduction*. This should introduce the reader to the central focus of your essay topic, including relating this to wider debates in the relevant subject based on the existing scholarly literature. It will aim to whet the reader’s appetite by outlining the central argument you will mount in your essay, while also explaining how you will construct and pursue this line of argument through a careful analysis of the topic and the use of evidence to back up your claims.

In addition, your introduction should explicitly set out the structure of your essay. This may be as straightforward as a short paragraph at the end of your introduction like: ‘This essay will proceed as follows. The first section will... This is important because it shows... The second section will..., which helps to illustrate the importance of... The third section closely examines the process of... and ties together the earlier discussion of... in section one and... in section two by... Finally, the conclusion will

summarize the key argument and findings of the essay, and will discuss how the central argument – that... – is important for broader debates in the study of politics and international studies because...’ – and so on. This should provide *signposts* to your reader of where you are going – what you are going to do in the essay – and *why*. Academic writing assignments involve making important choices about what you will choose to concentrate on – and what you will leave aside – and these choices should be clearly and logically justified to the reader.

The main body of your essay – the reader’s ‘main meal’ in the three-course dinner metaphor – should contain the substantive content of your research, analysis, and argument. You should aim to implicitly address the following general questions:

- What are the big debates in the field of politics and international studies that relate to this topic?
- What are the more specific debates in the existing academic literature on this topic?
- How does your essay address/fit into these larger debates?
- What is your central argument, and how is this constructed?
- What does your essay add up to? What are your key findings?
- So what? Why does this matter?

It is usually considered best practice to organize a sizable university essay through the use of appropriate sub-headings to organize your text (some lecturers prefer that sub-headings are not used, however, so it is always important to check this if you are unsure). These different sections should proceed logically (it should be obvious to the reader why you have chosen to order the different sections this way) and must be carefully connected through appropriate transitions and making explicit connections between different points. If you are using sub-headings, these should usually contain several paragraphs (i.e., one sub-heading for each paragraph is not appropriate), while paragraphs should usually contain between a minimum of 3 and a maximum of 6-8 sentences. Some of the most common errors in students’ academic writing include overly-short paragraphs (of 1-2 sentences), or overly-long paragraphs that stretch on for more than a page – sometimes multiple pages – without a break.

Correct paragraphing is vital for ensuring that your written work achieves your intended aims in terms of clarity and maintaining a logical structure. Many

paragraphs may follow a structure like the following: statement → example → explanation. The first sentence will make the key statement of the paragraph, which tells the reader what is the main topic/issue that will be discussed in this paragraph; this may be followed by an example of the point that has been made in the statement, to illustrate how this broad point works in practice; finally, your paragraph may include a closing sentence or several sentences that more thoroughly explain the key point and the relevance/implications of the example that is used, while also ideally providing a logical transition to the following paragraph.

The final section of your essay – the ‘dessert’ – is the conclusion, which should round off the entire piece of work in a coherent and, ideally, an interesting way. This should summarize the key findings and your central argument – reminding the reader of what you have concentrated on in the essay and what you have found out – without simply repeating word-for-word what you have said previously in either the main body or the introduction. Usually new information will not be introduced in the conclusion unless this is strictly relevant to how you are completing your assignment, but you may wish to note areas for further research that are suggested by your analysis and argument. It is often useful for students to examine academic articles relating to their respective topic/subject to see how other authors organize their own introductions, the body of their papers, and how they frame their conclusions to round their articles off in a coherent fashion. In this sense, you are reading academic literature not only for content, but also for understanding the *structure* and the process of academic writing.

WRITING A DISSERTATION

An academic dissertation is a major piece of student research in your undergraduate or postgraduate studies, which requires a significantly greater and more sustained research effort than essays or other coursework assignments. For a dissertation project you work independently (without advisor assistance) on gathering sources from the existing academic literature, collecting data and evidence, building your theoretical and methodological framework, and developing a persuasive argument, but you should discuss the main parameters of your research project with your advisor. Specifically, this will include discussing: (1) how you select a research topic, and how you should narrow and refine the **scope of your research**; (2) how you define and articulate a **central research question**; (3) and how you **structure and organise** the dissertation.

Time management

The academic quality of a dissertation – and the mark it receives – depends to a very significant degree on how effectively you manage and use your time to design your dissertation project, to conduct research, and to plan, draft, and complete the writing process.

Starting early – and working steadily – will help you to:

1. Complete your dissertation draft before the submission deadline, with more time to refine your argument, writing style, and dissertation structure.
2. Reduce your level of stress in the period leading up to the submission deadline.
3. Submit a more polished version with less likelihood of typing and grammatical errors, referencing mistakes, or misuse of factual information and data.

Formulating a research question⁸

Research puzzles

One useful method for formulating a central research question for a dissertation project is to carefully reflect on whether you can identify a counterintuitive research puzzle or problem in your area of interest that:

- a. Is not addressed (or is not effectively addressed) within the existing literature;

⁸ Adapted from Alvesson, Mats and Jorgen Sandberg (2013) *Constructing Research Questions: Doing Interesting Research*. London, Sage.

b. Raises new research questions that go against the grain of the conventional wisdom in a specific area;

or

c. Combines existing research questions or lines of inquiry in a new way, and for which there is not an obvious answer or explanation.

Literature gaps

Students are often told they should look for a ‘gap’ in the existing academic literature to design a suitable research question that can contribute to addressing this. However, you should be wary of designing a research question solely through the identification of a gap in the existing literature. When done well this can provide a compelling rationale for a research question, but there are several risks that must be avoided:

1. Literature gaps often exist for a reason.

This may include the lack of sufficient scholarly interest in the question (which does not always rule it out), or because an interesting question is especially complex and difficult to research (dissertations impose strict time and resource limits on the scope of research projects).

2. Gaps are more often claimed than demonstrated in dissertations.

It is common for students to make a strong claim that a specific gap exists in the literature around a topic that, upon closer examination through more comprehensive research and background reading, is not really a gap at all. Some ‘gaps’ exist because a question has an obvious ‘no-brainer’ answer.

3. Identifying a literature gap is not essential for a good dissertation.

Rather than ‘over-selling’ a potential literature gap, students achieve stronger dissertation results through identifying a clearly articulated central research question that narrows the scope of their study and provides an analytic boundary that improves the coherence of the dissertation.

Nine steps for arriving at a research question

1. What is your specific area of interest?
2. What is the nature and extent of the existing academic literature in your area of interest?
3. What questions are authors of existing literature asking of the area of interest?

4. Are they asking all of the interesting questions? If not, what are they missing?
5. Of the questions they are asking, are they reaching compelling answers?
6. Of the new and neglected questions, and the old poorly answered ones, which question most interests you?
7. Does this question have an obvious ‘no-brainer’ answer?
8. Do you have the methodological skills and resources to effectively address this question within the period of a dissertation?
9. Can this question be effectively addressed within the wordcount and limited time period of a dissertation?

Writing dissertation introductions and conclusions

The introduction should:

- Introduce immediately what the topic of the research is, why it is important, and how you will approach it (for example, what is the key debate here in the scholarly literature that the work speaks to, and how does it do so?).
- Explicitly define the central research question that drives the research, situated against the existing literature in the field and contemporary/historical developments, and explain why the question is important (this may include discussing existing explanations for the central research question, if applicable, why these are insufficient, and how you will go beyond these).
- Provide brief background context on the empirical cases and the theoretical literature you address, and justify your choices credibly (that is, why use these theories, and why select these cases?).
- Concisely explain the methodology you use (even if this is explained in much more detail in subsequent chapters), and why this is appropriate for addressing the central research question.
- Provide a concise overview of the structure, chapter by chapter, including how these fit together, and provide a brief outline of the central argument and main findings of the research.

The conclusion should:

- Revisit the central research question, summarize the main findings, and explain how the question has been addressed.
- Link the work together into a cohesive whole, explaining how it ‘hangs together’ as a coherent body of work that is logical, well-reasoned, and analytically rigorous.
- Provide a concise but powerful summary of the theoretical, empirical, and policy findings of the ‘lessons learned’, while also situating the findings within the existing scholarly literature on the subject.
- Discuss the implications of the work for possible future research, and how the work may be relevant for wider debates in the field.
- Wrap up with a final concluding paragraph or two that leave the reader in no doubt as to: (1) what your main argument is; and (2) why it is important.

FORMULATING A HYPOTHESIS⁹

Not all dissertations explicitly articulate and test a hypothesis or set of hypotheses, nor do they need to. However, students sometimes err by presenting a statement of their hypothesis that is not in fact a hypothesis but is either a normative assertion or is a statement which simply lacks plausibility. If you choose to design your dissertation research around a set of hypotheses, these will often take the form of ‘if *x*, then *y*’ causal statements, and must be based upon logical reasoning that is clearly explained to the reader and is carefully contextualised within the scope of your dissertation research and existing academic debates related to the topic.

The characteristics of a good hypothesis

1. Hypotheses must be *empirical* statements not normative assertions.
2. *Generality* – being able to explain a general phenomenon.
3. *Plausibility* – there must be some logical reason for thinking that a hypothesis might be confirmed.
4. *Specificity* – the concepts used in a hypothesis must be carefully defined.
5. A hypothesis should be stated in a manner that corresponds to the way in which the research intends to test it (it should be *consistent with the data*).
6. A hypothesis should be *testable* – there must be some evidence that is obtainable and that will indicate whether the hypothesis is correct. Hypotheses for which either confirming or nonconfirming evidence is impossible to gather are untestable.

⁹ Adapted from Johnson, Janet Buttolph and Richard A. Joslyn (1995) *Political Science Research Methods*, Third Edition. Washington, DC: CQ Press. Chapter 3: ‘The Building Blocks of Social Scientific Research: Hypotheses, Concepts, and Variables’.

HOW TO USE FIGURES AND TABLES¹⁰

When you have data that could be conveyed in a table or figure, your first task is to choose the most effective of these formats. Some kinds of data are better represented in a table, some in a chart, others in a graph. Your choice will affect how your readers respond to the data.

Tables are grids consisting of columns and rows that present numerical or verbal facts by categories. *Figures* include charts, graphs, diagrams, photographs, maps, drawings, and other images. These types of figures and tables are collectively referred to as *illustrations* or *graphics*. An illustration representing complex numbers – or a diagram depicting causal mechanisms, sequences, and interactions – rarely speaks for itself. You must discuss each illustration so that readers know what to see in it and how to understand its relevance to your argument.

Be consistent

At the start of the writing process, decide on a uniform format for the presentation of all figures and tables. Keep each illustration as simple as its content allows, including only relevant data, to avoid distracting readers. Ensure consistency in how illustrations are presented throughout the essay or dissertation. Represent elements of the same kind – axes, lines, data points, bars, square boxes, circles, arrows – in the same way. For example, select one set of colours/shades and style/width of lines and a common font size for all illustrations. You should design and compile all illustrations that you use yourself, including when these reproduce information from another source (which must be acknowledged). Do not cut-and-paste illustrations from secondary sources.

Tables and figures should normally be positioned immediately after the paragraph in which they are first mentioned. Each individual illustration must be clearly titled and numbered. Number tables separately from figures, in the order in which you discuss them in the text. In a dissertation, for example, figures in chapter 1 should be titled Figure 1.1, 1.2, 1.3; figures in chapter 2 should be titled Figure 2.1, 2.2, 2.3; apply the same rule to tables (Table 1.1, 1.2, 1.3). If you use only a few figures or tables, number these consecutively across chapters or within a single essay (Figure 1, 2, 3). The title must indicate in concise terms what is being illustrated – titles should be kept short but descriptive enough to indicate the specific nature of the data and to differentiate every illustration from every other one. (For example, Figure 1.1: US–China trade in

¹⁰ Adapted from Kate L. Turabian (2008) *A Manual for Writers of Research Papers, Theses, and Dissertations*, 8th Edition. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press. Chapter 8: 'Presenting Evidence in Tables and Figures', Chapter 26: 'Tables and Figures'.

goods, 2000-18). Clearly label rows and columns in tables and both axes in charts and graphs.

Figures

Exercise care in selecting which format is most effective for presenting the data you wish to convey to the reader. For example, bar charts communicate as much by image as by specific numbers and are a useful way to emphasize comparisons among discrete items. Bars that seem to be arranged in no pattern imply no point, so if possible, group and arrange bars to give readers an image of an order that matches your point. Most data that fit a bar chart can also be represented in a pie chart, but for the purposes of an essay or dissertation a pie chart is generally harder to read than a bar chart, and it invites misinterpretation because readers must mentally compare proportions of segments whose size is hard to judge in the first place. In comparison, line graphs are most useful for emphasizing trends over time.

Diagrams that illustrate the sequencing of causal processes and interactions, or which unpack important properties of a specific object of study, can be powerful visual devices that help to draw the reader's attention to key points. These should be designed in a careful and coherent fashion that can be clearly understood by the reader. Consider what readers need to know, what value-added the diagram (or a set of diagrams) gives, and how comprehensible and accessible it will be for them. Diagrams should be consistently designed across your work and should not vary widely in appearance. Ensure the different components of a diagram are arranged at appropriate and consistent distances, have a standard shape and size as much as possible (such as square boxes, circles, and arrows), and that the text in a diagram is a suitable font size (usually the same size font as the main text). The use of diagrams to depict conceptual relationships and patterns of causation or interaction should be designed to clearly add value to the discussion in the main text and should not simply reproduce the same information. Where the concepts involved are fewer and the relationships between them are simpler, diagrams may have little value-added, and if they are included readers may find them disappointing.

Tables

A table is a useful means to communicate data as it seems precise and objective. It emphasizes individual numbers and forces readers to infer relationships or trends (unless you state them in an introductory sentence). Tables with lots of data can seem especially dense, so keep their image and content as simple as possible and avoid distracting the reader with visual clutter. Order the rows and columns by a principle that lets the reader quickly find what you want them to see.

Tables are useful when there is only a small amount of data to present, so that a simplifying chart or graph is unnecessary, or when readers need to know numerical values more precisely than would be shown in a figure, such as if there are fairly

small variations in results. Tables can also be more useful than figures if there is strong variation between the lowest and highest numbers you wish to present, so that it would be difficult to display the range of the data effectively in a figure. In addition to the presentation of numerical data, tables can also be an effective way to order and represent relationships between different categories of concepts, to illustrate a typology, or to disaggregate the constituent elements of different theoretical perspectives for the purpose of comparison.

Communicate data ethically

Your illustration must be not only clear, accurate, and relevant but also honest. It should not distort its data or their relationships to make a point, or mislead through implying false correlations or by encouraging readers to misjudge numerical values. If the table or figure supports a point, clearly state this.

DISSERTATION CHECKLIST

Introduction

- ✓ Does the background context help to set the scene clearly and to capture the reader's attention, and is it directly relevant to the topic?
- ✓ Is there a 'road-map' paragraph that explicitly outlines and provides an academic rationale for the structure of the dissertation?
- ✓ Is the central research question clearly articulated? Is it framed *as a question*, rather than as a statement, a theme, or an argument?

Literature review

- ✓ Does the literature review identify the key points of debate relating to this specific topic?
- ✓ Is the dissertation topic clearly situated within existing debates in the literature?
- ✓ Does the literature review clearly articulate alternative ways of understanding the topic at hand, rather than presenting a one-sided story?

Theoretical framework

- ✓ Is the theoretical framework for the dissertation clearly articulated, with a compelling academic justification for its applicability to the topic?
- ✓ Are competing theoretical frameworks presented in a thorough and balanced discussion of their respective advantages and disadvantages for the topic?
- ✓ Are the links between the theoretical framework and the empirical research clearly explained?

Methodological framework

- ✓ Does the dissertation make clear what methods are used to conduct the research, how they are used, and why they are appropriate for investigating this topic?
- ✓ Are the research methods carefully linked to the central research question and the theoretical framework used in the dissertation?
- ✓ Do the methods *align* with the research objectives?

Research chapters

- ✓ Does the analysis develop a compelling narrative and central argument for the dissertation?
- ✓ Are the findings in the research chapters clearly articulated and developed in relation to the central research question and the theoretical framework?
- ✓ If the significance of research findings could be interpreted in multiple ways, is there a compelling and logical explanation for why one interpretation should be preferred?
- ✓ Are the research findings based on compelling evidence from a range of sources, careful analysis, and well-reasoned arguments, rather than making rash generalizations?

Conclusion

- ✓ Does the conclusion clearly present the research findings and the central argument, and explain why these are significant?
- ✓ Does the conclusion demonstrate how the research findings and central argument relate to the original research question?
- ✓ Does the conclusion combine the different strands of the research into a coherent whole?

References

- ✓ Is the referencing format correct, and is it used consistently throughout the dissertation?
- ✓ Does the bibliography include all references cited in the dissertation?

CONCLUSION

These tips for developing good academic writing provide only the basic building blocks that can help you develop your writing skills while studying at university – much more is needed in terms of essay writing practice, reviewing and learning from your feedback on essays, and perhaps reading more substantive published texts on how to write academic essays. If you focus on honing your skills with these basic ‘tricks of the trade’, however, you will almost certainly find your ability to master the art of academic writing has improved. This will provide you with vital tools for surviving your university studies – and performing well – and will prove useful to your future careers in whatever path you choose to pursue.

FURTHER RESOURCES

- Alvesson, Mats and Jorgen Sandberg (2013) *Constructing Research Questions: Doing Interesting Research*. London, Sage.
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