The Academic Writing Process

The academic writing process is more about gaining knowledge than it is about writing. The writing part, of the academic writing process, is only used to demonstrate the knowledge which you have gained.

As long as you're able to do the research and understand the topic which you're writing about you'll do well.

You still need to be able to produce high quality written work, but the substance needs to be there first. Because after all, well written rubbish is still rubbish, but poor writing can be improved to fully show your knowledge.

After you've received your assignment the academic writing process can be split into four parts:

* Research – understanding and finding information about the topic you'll be writing about.
* Planning – sorting all the information you found in the research phase, into an outline for writing.
* Writing – producing the written work.
* Finalizing – checking your writing for mistakes in grammar, spelling and style, more commonly described as proofreading your work.

As explained above you should be able to do the first three parts if you work hard and understand your chosen area of study. For the last part of the academic writing process I offer advice and help in the proofreading part of this website, including articles and checklists for you to print and use.

But first an important point to do with the academic writing process before I start to explain the research section.

You've received the title or topic for your piece of coursework, the first thing you must do is understand it. Make sure you're clear about precisely what the topic is and what it is asking for.

If you need to look up any words you're uncertain about, do so – it's better to check now, if you've any doubts, before you start the academic writing process than later.

I've seen far too many students fail a written task because they didn't write about the correct topic. If you think the lecturer has asked the wrong question, tough, you've to answer the question given to you.

If you think you can write a much better essay on a slightly different topic, and you believe that you'll get marks anyway – you won’t.

Write about the topic you've been given and nothing else!

Research

OK, now we can start the research phase. No matter what you're writing about you need to be factually accurate and precise. This means going to the library and doing research as the first part of the academic writing process.

You can use the internet for some research but using actual books and journals will be much better. If your institution has a subscription to the electronic copy of the book or journal, fine you can use them like that, but if not, go to the library – do some research.

This means reading something, taking notes, writing down the information about the book or journal (author(s) or editor(s) names, date, title, pages and publisher as a minimum).

You'll need all that information to cite your source in your text and add the reference to the reference section at the end of your paper, see the referencing section for more information. You'll need to read many different books and papers before you're in a position to start planning your paper.

When taking notes about each one you read you should rewrite it in your own works by either paraphrasing or summarizing. If you do use the exact same wording you'll need to quote it. If you don't quote, paraphrase or summarize correctly you could be accused of plagiarism, which is a very serious offence.

If you're not sure where to start your research for the academic writing process, enter the main keyword or phrase from the title of your assignment into a search engine (Google, Yahoo, etc.) to get some general and basic material.

This should only be used to help you understand the basics of the topic. You'll need to search either the library’s search feature, for its catalogue, or a citation index (Web of Science, Scopus, etc.) to find the detailed information which will form the substance of your paper.

It's better to read too much than not enough, so plan plenty of time for this part.

When reading an essay or lab report, a lecturer can tell which students know and understand what they're writing about and those who've just done the basic amount of work.

You can come back and do more research later in the process, for clarification of certain points, but if you can keep it to a minimum, it'd be good.

Once you've all the information you need, you're ready to start planning your writing.

Planning

Everything in life, which is built well, is based on a strong foundation. Your writing, as part of the academic writing process, is no different. There are two parts to your foundation for excellent writing. The first is the research and the second is the planning.

Now that you've all the information and knowledge gained in the research phase go back and look at your topic again. How are you going to turn that knowledge into some writing worth of top marks? – By planning.

The first part of the planning can be quite disorganized. You just need to think of all the facts that you wish to include in your writing. There are several ways in which you can do this. You should choose the one that suits you the best.

* Brainstorming – In brainstorming you write down each and every idea, just as they come to you. Then sort and refine the list after all your ideas are safely on paper, where they can't be forgotten. This'll be quite messy at the start until you sort them more, but it's best if you've so many ideas you've to get them out of your head and on to some paper.
* Clustering – This is similar to brainstorming in some ways, but also different. Again you just write all you thoughts down as that come to you, but you also sort them at the same time. Whenever you think of a main idea write it in some clean space on the paper and link all the related ideas to it with lines to form a cluster map.
* Making lists – This is a more organized version of a cluster map. Here you start with all the main ideas first and then list all the related points under each main heading. This way when you're writing you won't forget anything which should go in each section.
* Asking questions – In this form of planning you think of the questions which could form the basis of your written work; one or more question for each part. You'll then answer the questions as you write.

Once you've got your list of all the information, which you'll include in your written work, you need to form the outline. This is where you decide how you'll answer the question in you topic or the title that you have been given.

While you should never go off topic in your academic writing it's quite often necessary to narrow your focus to be able to provide the level of detail needed in the space or time you've to complete each assignment.

You'll need to make a plan, quite possibly paragraph by paragraph, of what you'd like to include in your essay. Here you'll take the related points from the ideas you wrote down, previously, and form your argument. This is an important part of the academic writing process as it means you won't waste time writing something which isn't well thought out.

The points in each paragraph should be related and grouped around one main point. When writing, each paragraph should contain one main point only and the related supporting minor points.

The paragraphs in you essay should follow on from each other to build your over all argument. In each paragraph you should cite the material you read in the research phase and which you paraphrased or summarized to write that paragraph.

In each piece you write there should be:

* An introductory paragraph explaining the overall topic and a little background.
* Several paragraphs in the main body of the text, each one about one main point. They should be ordered logically so that each paragraph follows on from the previous one.
* A concluding paragraph, at the end, where you summarize everything you have said in the piece of writing.
* A reference section where you list all the references you cited in the text.

Writing

The writing phase, of the academic writing process, is a multi part process. You'll write a draft, edit it and rewrite it, before editing and rewriting again.

To begin with, write a rough draft from your notes and plan, made in the planning section. Even at this early stage include all the citations you'll need and add the references to the reference list. If you don't do this, when revising your work you might move a part that needs citing, forget about it and be accused of plagiarism.

At this stage, just write your composition.

Don’t worry too much about the style or flow of the language used. You need to get a completed first draft written to make sure that it's of a suitable length and contains the right amount of detail.

Throughout the writing process focus more on the content than the language. The language will be improved in the post-writing part. Get the substance (information) correct first and the dressing (language) can be sorted later.

So write a draft, read it, rewrite it to improve it. You should be concerned with:

* The order of the information.
* Are there enough supporting points for each main point?
* Is each main point separate and unique (make sure you aren't just repeating something you've already said)?
* Is everything related to the topic or title?
* Do the main points support your conclusion?

If you took your time to do the research and planning phases properly the writing phase should be fairly straight forward.

Once you're happy with the content and flow of the information you can move onto the finalizing stage where we'll improve the language you used to present the contents.

Finalizing

In this stage of the academic writing process you'll edit and proofread the language used. If you need more help with the language, go to the writing help section, where there are plenty of articles about the rules of the English language.

While in the proofreading section there are checklists to make sure you've checked for all the common grammar and spelling mistakes.

Firstly you should edit your text to make sure that the style, voice and language used are consistent across the document and suitable for your audience.

The style should be formal. Don't use contractions (e.g. don’t for do not, you’ve for you have).

The voice should again be formal, but you've some more leeway here. The voice is the way that you speak to your reader. If appropriate this could be slightly less formal, but if in doubt keep it formal.

The language you use should be appropriate for your audience. In academic writing it's assumed your audience will be knowledgeable about at least the basics of the topic area. So keep your writing quite advanced as far as the content is concerned.

Then you should check for mistakes in spelling and/or grammar by proofreading. If possible leave some time after finishing writing before proofreading; then read through once for each type of mistake you're trying to find, work without distractions and remain focused. See the proofreading section for more tips, techniques and help.

Conclusion

Once you've finished all these stages of the academic writing process you should've produced the best piece of academic writing that you can. If you start to follow these good practices, related to the academic writing process, from your first year at university they'll put you in a good position in your later years when the work will count more towards your final degree classification.

If you'd like further advice about writing either essays, lab reports or thesis/dissertations please go to the relevant sections.

If you'd like me to help you with your proofreading you can go to my free trial page and send a sample of your writing to me. This way you'll be able to see the improvements that I could make after you've finished the academic writing process.

Alternatively you can visit the Excellent Proofreading and Writing Facebook page where I’m happy to answer your questions or offer advice.