

Finding your Academic Voice: A Students Guide to the Art of Academic Writing



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Introduction

The ability to write in an academic style that is appropriate to the discipline is one of the most important skills that a student develops over the course of his or her studies. Academic writing can be a challenging endeavour and it is important to remember that it is a process that takes time, effort and feedback to master.

We have formulated this learning booklet as a result of a series of studies that were conducted with our students around the issues of assessment, academic writing and feedback. Throughout this booklet we address some of the most common concerns that students raised in our studies, and these issues are consistent with other research on the subject (Whitehead, 2002; Brown, et al., 2008). For the purpose of this learning pack we are also drawing on our own considerable teaching experience to provide examples of the kinds of problems we commonly encounter.

Section 1: Academic Style

What is an academic style?

This is something that many students find either difficult or confusing, especially at first. It is important to recognise that there are many different kinds of writing used for different purposes. For example, most people would not write an application for a job in the same style they would use for a text or quick e-mail to a friend. More informal styles of written communication have become increasingly common as texts and e-mails increasingly replace letters. This is absolutely fine when used appropriately; the key is to consider the purpose and the context of your communication. Academic writing is a formal style of writing and it is the style that is used for most assessed work. Academic writing conveys and explains knowledge, ideas, and in the case of assessment, engagement and understanding of subject matter.

Example 1: this illustrates the difference between an academic and non academic style of writing

The main point that I am trying to get across is that qualitative research is the best for this because you can get insight into thoughts and feelings that you can't in quantitative research.

How do we rewrite the above in an academic style?

A qualitative approach should be taken to allow a deeper exploration of the participants' thoughts and feelings than would be possible with a quantitative approach.

Academic Style

Activity 1

Rewrite the short extract below in an academic style.

Lots of research shows that adherence to medication is linked to what you believe about the illness (Ogden, 2007). If you think that you can't control your illness then you're less likely to take your medication.

For feedback on this activity see page 44

Academic Style

The best way to learn how to write in an academic style is to read as much as you can. Read books, journal articles and reports and look at the way they are written. As you read you should get a much clearer sense of what academic writing is. You will notice differences in the styles used. For example journal articles tend to be different to and more formal than textbooks. We are using an informal style here but it is still an academic style.

In the following pages we present some short extracts from pieces written about the gender gap in pay. The first is from an academic journal article, the second from a textbook and the third from a newspaper article.

Activity 2

Read each extract and consider:

- What kind of style is this written in? How formal is it?
- At which audience is each piece aimed at?
- What kind of evidence is used to support points? How is this evidence presented or referenced?

Academic Style

Extract 1: Journal article

From p.819-820 in Chevalier, A. (2007). Education, Occupation and Career Expectations: Determinants of the Gender Pay Gap for UK Graduates. *Oxford Bulletin of Economics and Statistics*, 69 (6), pp.819-842.

Differences in wages between men and women have been the focus of attention of social scientists and policy makers for decades (see Altonji and Blank, 1999, for an excellent survey). In the UK, three decades after the Equal Pay Act 1970 and Sex Discrimination Act (1975), women are still paid 80% of the men's mean wage (Harkness, 1996; Blackaby et al., 1997; Lissenburgh, 2000; Swaffield, 2000). Even after accounting for differences in observable characteristics affecting productivity, such as education, labour market experience or occupation, about half of the gap is left unexplained. This unexplained component of the gender gap is often viewed as reflecting discrimination.

Academic Style

Extract 2 Textbook.

From p.324 in Brannon, L. (1996). *Gender: Psychological Perspectives*. 2nd ed., Boston: Allyn and Bacon.

Gender stereotyping and discrimination in promotion contribute to the phenomena of the glass ceiling and the glass escalator but the sticky floor is also a factor in women's lower wages and problems in career advancement. The concept of a sticky floor also contrasts with the glass ceiling as a means to describe low-status occupations with little opportunity for advancement. That is, occupations in which employees get stuck at the lowest levels. Many of the occupations dominated by women fit this description including, clerical and secretarial jobs, beauticians, garment workers and household service cleaners. Greater numbers of ethnic minority women tend to be concentrated in these low level jobs, with both African American and Hispanic American women more likely to occupy blue-collar jobs than White women (Green & Russo, 1993). Ethnic differences exist within blue-collar jobs with Black women more likely to work in health service jobs and Hispanic women more likely to be employed in manufacturing.

Academic Style

Extract 3 Newspaper article.

From Saner, E. (2010). Why women won't ask for a pay rise. *The Guardian*, Friday August 27 [online]. Available <http://www.guardian.co.uk/lifeandstyle/2010/aug/27/women-wont-ask-pay-rises>

When was the last time you asked for a [pay](#) rise? Does the very thought bring you out in a sweat? If so, you're not alone. A 2006 survey found that while 80% of women felt underpaid, two-thirds had never asked for more money and those who had, described it as one of the most stressful things they'd ever done. Corinne Mills, Managing Director of [Personal Career Management](#), who provide professional advice and coaching, says, "Men don't have an issue about asking for a pay rise. They will do it as a routine. Women will do it more reactively if a disparity has been revealed and they agonise over it more."

This wouldn't be such a problem if men and women had achieved equal pay. But 40 years after it was enshrined in law in the UK, women are still paid, on average, 17% less than men for full-time work and 39.9% less for part-time work. Last week a report by the Chartered Management Institute (CMI) warned that it would be 57 years until female managers reached equal pay with their male counterparts – the average male manager is now paid a basic salary of £41,337, while their female peers get £31,306.

Professor Marilyn Davidson, co- director of the Centre for Equality and Diversity at Work, says there are many reasons why the gender pay gap persists. One is that typical "women's work", such as cleaning and catering, has traditionally been lower paid, and another is that women are more likely to take time out from their careers to raise children.

Academic Style

Activity 3: Reflection on different styles of writing

Choose a broad area, [for example, obesity](#), and find (i) a journal article, (ii) a piece from a textbook, (iii) a newspaper and (iv) a magazine article relevant to the topic. Read a couple of paragraphs of each and see what you notice about the writing styles.

- How is the journal article different from the textbook? How are they similar?
- What type of evidence is referred to? Does the evidence used support discussion?
- Look at the newspaper and magazine articles, how are they different to the book and journal article? Are there any similarities?
- Summarise the key points of difference between academic and journalistic writing styles.

Now open up a general website, such as MSN or a blog and see if you can find a piece on the same topic.

- What style is used here?

There are often comments after pieces like this. Look at these and observe how this very informal style is different from journalistic and academic styles.

By now it should be clear what academic writing is, although it can be hard to explain exactly what is meant by it.

Section 2 Using the Passive and Active Voice

In this section we will discuss the use of the passive and active voices in academic writing. We start by considering one of the most common questions that students ask:

Why can't I write 'I'?

It is traditional in many disciplines that academic writing uses the 3rd person. So instead of saying '*I am going to compare two theories of cognitive development*' you might say '*Two theories of cognitive development will be compared*'.

However in recent years the use of 'I' or 'we' has become more acceptable, particularly where research is being reported and you will probably have seen this in journal articles. In general 'I' or 'we' is not encouraged in assessment, however, this does depend on the discipline and the nature of the assessment. For example, it is essential to use the first person ('I') in a reflective log or portfolio.

Example: How to 'get rid' of the 'I'.

- Students often try to avoid using 'I' by writing 'This author' or 'this student' instead. This leads to sentence constructions that do not read well. e.g. this researcher collected the data over a 6 week period.

This can be overcome by using the passive voice.

The data were collected over a 6 week period by the researcher.

What is the passive voice?

Passive voice – the action (to collect) goes first and the actor/s (the researchers) are put after the verb.

We could also write this in the passive voice without mentioning the actors at all.

The data were collected over a 6 week period.

Example: Using the passive voice

Levels of physical activity are lower for Irish women than for Irish men (Morgan et al., 2008). This author will review the evidence on gender and physical activity and she will use this to try to explain why this is the case.

This can be rewritten in the passive voice as below:

Levels of physical activity are lower for Irish women than for Irish men (Morgan et al., 2008). Evidence regarding the relationship between gender and physical activity will be reviewed in order to attempt to explain the gender difference.

Activity 4

In the extract below a student is proposing a research study to explore the ways in which students' make sense of safe drinking advice. **Rewrite the extract to remove 'this student' and 'this author'.**

Focus-groups were used to collect data for this student's study. This author's aim was to explore the ways in which students' understand and make sense of safe drinking advice. Focus groups are a good method to use to explore people's understandings of an issue (Wilkinson, 2008). They provide a very natural way to collect data (Wilkinson, 1999) as they are similar to everyday conversations. For these reasons this author chose focus-groups for this study.

See feedback on page 44



What is the active voice?

Active voice – the actor/s are put before the action.

The researchers (actors) collected the data over a 6 week period.

We often use the active voice to describe research findings or to clearly attribute arguments, conclusions etc to their authors. For example

Kirkpatrick et al., (2005) reported gender differences in motivations for exercise.

O’Kane (2008) concluded that the transition to primary school is smoother if the child is prepared.

Active Voice — actors ahead of the action

In general it is much clearer to use the active voice however many students overuse it. Using the passive voice allows you to speak impersonally about evidence or to describe key aspects of a research project.

Using a mixture of the passive and active voices is the most effective approach to writing in most cases. If you overuse the passive voice work can be unclear and hard to follow, but overusing the active voice can create a misleading impression.

Look at the following examples:

Example 1

Ogden (2007) argues that obesity is a serious public health problem.

The active voice is used here but this sentence is misleading. It is widely accepted that obesity is a serious public health issue but saying 'Ogden argues' implies that Ogden is trying to make the case for it and that there is debate.

According to Ogden (2007) obesity is a serious public health problem.

This is better but still doesn't adequately convey the sense of a widely accepted fact.

Obesity is a serious public health problem (Ogden, 2007).

Presenting this information as a statement in the passive voice conveys the information and it's meaning much more effectively.

Example 2

In a study of 257 school girls it was found that levels of body dissatisfaction and dieting were related to social class (Ogden & Thomas, 1999).

The use of the passive voice here is unclear and makes the writing 'woolly' and hard to follow. An active sentence construction is much better here:

In a study of 257 schoolgirls, Ogden & Thomas (1999) found that levels of body dissatisfaction and dieting were related to social class.

Example 3

Measham (2006) argues that sensible drinking advice can suffer from a credibility problem if it is not grounded in actual drinking practices.

Sensible drinking advice can suffer from a credibility problem if it is not grounded in actual drinking practices (Measham, 2006).

Both of these could be used, but in the first one, active construction is better as it conveys accurately the nature of Measham's argument. The verb 'argues' is used appropriately here.

To summarise:

These are general principles not rigid rules

Use the passive voice:

When describing procedures (e.g. 100 questionnaires were distributed...).

If the information is general knowledge.

If the information is widely accepted and/or known to be true.

When summarising a lot of information or evidence that points to the same conclusion.

Use the active voice:

When describing a research study or particular piece of evidence (e.g. The researchers collected the data over a 6 week period....).

When presenting different sides of an argument.

If you want to convey a message that is direct and to the point.

Section 3: Using verbs appropriately

You do need to think carefully about the verbs that you use and choose them appropriately. Think about what each of the following mean and when it would be appropriate to use them. Select a journal article of interest to you and examine the verbs used. Note the use of verbs on the list and of other verbs. Think about what each sentence means and how the meaning would be affected by changed the verb.

Additional verbs

Murphy (2011) argues...

Murphy (2011) concludes...

Murphy (2011) criticises...

Murphy (2011) demonstrates...

Murphy (2011) describes...

Murphy (2011) discusses...

Murphy (2011) explains...

Murphy (2011) found...

Murphy (2011) identifies...

Murphy (2011) recommends...

Murphy (2011) reported...

Murphy (2011) reviewed...

Murphy (2011) suggested...

Murphy (2011) states...

Activity 5

Below are three brief sentences. For each, choose one or more of the verbs given below to fill-in the blanks.

- a. Eisenberger & Lieberman (2004) proposed the 'pain overlap theory' which _____ that physical and social pain have a shared basis.

Verbs: argues, discusses, concludes, states

- b. In their study of stress and eustress involving student nurses, Gibbons et al., (2008) _____ that clinical placements were an important source of positive experiences.

Verbs: found, argued, reported, discussed

- c. As Willig (2001) _____, there is more than one version of Grounded Theory.

*This is known to be true, as there are a number of different approaches to Grounded Theory

Verbs: argues, suggests, points out, explains

- d. Black & William (1997) _____ the evidence regarding the effects of feedback on learning and _____ that feedback has the potential to facilitate learning considerably.

Verbs for the first blank: discuss, identify, explain, describe

Verbs for the second blank: describe, discuss, recommend, conclude

For Feedback see page 45 and 46

Section 4 Use of Sources

Using sources appropriately.

Any piece of academic work draws on a wide range of sources and these should be used to build arguments. Sources should be cited and referenced appropriately as discussed in section 5 of this booklet, however you also need to pay attention to how you use them. Sources can be used or abused!

Appropriate sources

Academic work must be based on appropriate academic sources. Appropriate sources in the areas of Nursing, Midwifery, Health and Early Childhood include textbooks, other academic books, journal articles, reports, policy documents, legislation, professional guidelines and publications by professional bodies. The most common academic sources that you will use are the textbooks and journal articles.

Most of these sources are available in either hardcopy or online. In general we find that students are more discriminating about the hardcopy sources they use than the internet sources. For example few students would use an opinion piece from a tabloid newspaper as a source but it is common to see equivalent websites used as sources. Just because information is on a website doesn't mean that it is accurate. Wikipedia, for instance, is great in many ways but it is not an appropriate academic source and you should avoid using it in your assignments. Often this happens because students begin researching for assignments with

Google searches, however we recommend that you start with your reading list and a search of the academic databases (e.g. ProQuest, ScienceDirect etc.). If much of the information in an assignment is taken from sources such as Wikipedia, Ask.com etc. then the lecturer has to ask 'Why is this student not engaging with the discipline and the evidence?'

When a student is awarded a degree in a subject it suggests that the student has reached a certain level of knowledge and understanding in a discipline and is familiar with the evidence-base of the discipline. Basing your work on the outcome of Google searches does not demonstrate this. And this does matter: would you be happy for someone you love to be cared for by a nurse whose knowledge of illness comes from Wikipedia and www.About.com ?

Activity 6

A student is asked to write an essay on promoting smoking cessation. From the list below, identify which are appropriate academic sources and which are not.

- Ogden, J. (2007). *Health Psychology: A textbook*. 4th ed., Buckingham: Open University Press.
- <http://www.smokinginengland.info/>
- Carr, A. (1999) *Easy Way To Stop Smoking*. London: Penguin.
- www.nicorette.ie
- Brugha, R., Tully, N., Dicker, P., Shelley, E., Ward, M. and McGee, H. (2009). *SLÁN 2007: Survey of Lifestyle, Attitudes and Nutrition in Ireland. Smoking Patterns in Ireland: Implications for Policy and Services*. Department of Health and Children. Dublin: The Stationery Office. Available http://www.dohc.ie/publications/slan_smoking.html
- Everson-Hock, E.S., Taylor, A.H. and Ussher, M. (2010). A qualitative perspective on multiple health behaviour change: views of smoking cessation advisors who promote physical activity. *The Journal of Smoking Cessation*, 5 (1), pp. 7-14.

See Feedback on page 47 and 48

Use of sources

When you reference a piece of information or an argument you are telling the reader where this information came from. In any piece of academic writing you should draw on information, ideas, arguments and so on from multiple sources and integrate them to make a new and original piece of work, whether it be an essay, a lab report or a journal article. If you want to use the words that another author has used then you need to make this clear by putting the words in quotation marks and citing them as per departmental guidelines. Quotes can be very helpful, but take care not to over-use them. An essay that consists mainly of different quotes suggests perhaps a lack of understanding of relevant issues.

An important skill to develop is the ability to paraphrase, i.e. to take a point or argument made by another source and to explain it in your own words. This is something that many students find challenging. Paraphrasing is not simply changing a few words in another author's text - it is explaining it in your own words and this is very different.

Example 1:

From Marks, D.M. et al., (2005). *Health Psychology: Theory, Research & Practice*. 2nd ed., London: Sage, p. 127).

Original Text

The evidence suggests that food preferences established in adolescence appear to continue well into adult life (Kelder et al., 1994)

A poor example of paraphrasing

The evidence suggests that food preferences developed in adolescence continue into adult life (Kelder et al., 1994)

Here the student has changed 'established' to 'developed' and omitted 'appear' and 'well' but this is just tinkering with the author's words. The sense is not being explained. Furthermore including the reference implies that the student has actually read the Kelder et al., (1994) article and this is misleading.

Adolescent food preferences seem to be fairly stable and extend into adulthood (Kelder et al., 1994, cited in Marks et al., 2005).

This is faithful to the sense of the original and does explain the point in the student's own words. It is also clear that the Kelder et al., (1994), article is a secondary source, i.e. it is cited in another source, in this case in the Marks et al., (2005) article.

Example 2:

Obtained from student work (reproduced with kind permission)

Original Text (Whitehead 2002)

Rolfe (1997) identifies that writing, as one of the most important skills that the critical and questioning nurse can adopt, is an integral skill that defines who we are and what we think, whilst Ashworth (1998) singles writing out as the most useful way of communicating ideas and reviewing our professional knowledge base.

Student Work

Rolfe 1997 identifies that writing is one of the most important skills that the critical and questioning nurse can adopt; is an integral skill that defines who we are and what we think (D, Whitehead MSc RGN "Issues and Innovations in Nursing education, Alexander Pope 1711)

Activity 7

How could this piece be improved?

For Feedback see page 49

Example 3

Below **extract A** is from an essay on obesity which is poorly written. See if you can identify where the problems are (see page 28 for feedback). In **extract B** the paragraph is rewritten and improved.

Extract A

Obesity is becoming more and more of a problem in Ireland with its prevalence increasing. In the SLAN survey they discuss that 38% of Irish people are overweight. The aforementioned survey also argues that 23% of people are obese. This has resulting economic consequences as if you are overweight then you are more likely to get diabetes and other illnesses like cardiovascular disease. Whelton et al., (2007) argued that 1 in 5 Irish people were obese (Whelton et al., 2007). Being overweight or obese increases the chances of morbidity and also of mortality.

Extract A feedback

1. This is not well structured, the student moves between establishing the extent of the problem, i.e. the prevalence of obesity and identifying the implications. The consequence of this is that the piece seems to 'jump about' and is harder to follow.
2. The verbs 'discuss' and 'argued' are used inappropriately here.
3. The SLAN survey is not properly referenced. There is no need for a 'clunky' term like 'the aforementioned survey' here. The Whelton reference is given twice in the same sentence – the reference at the end of the sentence is redundant.
4. The claim that obesity is associated with disease is not supported with a reference.
5. The phraseology could be improved, i.e. 'if you are overweight..', this is not appropriate in an academic essay.

Extract B

Obesity is becoming a major health problem in Ireland and the prevalence has increased. The 2007 SLAN survey (Morgan et al., 2009) found that 38% of Irish people were overweight and 23% were obese. Other evidence (Whelton et al., 2007) suggests that 1 in 5 Irish adults are obese. This has significant health and economic implications as excess weight and obesity are associated with increased mortality and morbidity (Marks et al., 2005). In particular there is an association with increased risk of cardiovascular disease and diabetes.

This is much clearer. All the points about prevalence are together and then the student goes on to discuss the health implications. The verbs used are appropriate and material is clearly written and appropriately referenced.

Activity 8

From p.1604 of Ramachandran, V.S. & Hirstein, W. (1998). The perception of phantom limbs: The D.O Hebb Lecture. *Brain*, 121, pp.1603-1630.

Phantom limb pains were probably known since antiquity and, not surprisingly, there is an elaborate folklore surrounding them. After Lord Nelson lost his right arm during an unsuccessful attack on Santa Cruz de Tenerife, he experienced compelling phantom limb pains, including the sensation of fingers digging into his phantom palm. The emergence of these ghostly sensations led the sealord to proclaim that his phantom was a 'direct proof of the existence of the soul' (Riddoch, 1941). If an arm can survive physical annihilation, why not the entire person? (p.1604)

Each of the following extracts is an attempt to paraphrase the above extract. Identify the example that makes good use of the source.

- a. Phantom limb pains were known since antiquity and there is an elaborate folklore surrounding them. After Lord Nelson lost his arm during an unsuccessful attack he experienced phantom limb pains including the sensation of fingers digging into his phantom palm. The emergence of these strange sensations led the sealord to say that his phantom was a 'direct proof of the existence of the soul' (Ramachandran & Hirstein, 1998).
- b. Lord Nelson lost his arm in battle and then experienced very bad phantom limb pain – he felt that his fingers were digging into the palm of the missing hand. He considered this to be proof that the soul exists (Riddoch, 1941) – if the arm can survive being annihilated then why not the whole person?
- c. Phantom limb pain has a long history. For example, Ramachandran & Hirstein (1998) discuss the case of Lord Nelson who believed that his phantom limb pain was evidence that the soul existed, as the limb seemed to 'live' after death or destruction.

For Feedback see page 50 and 51

You're not allowed to put in your own opinion

Yes you are! In fact you will be rewarded for giving your opinion, but it has to be an academic opinion and that's where the confusion can occur. We all have lots of opinions on all sorts of things. We often share them with family and friends in informal situations such as at the dinner table, watching TV, over a coffee or in the pub. This is an important part of life but it is different to showing mastery of an academic discipline. An academic opinion is one that is an informed opinion. It is based on knowledge of the subject and the evidence base particular to that subject.

Activity 9

Think back to the last time you had an informal conversation with someone about politics or economics.

What language did you use to express your opinions?

What evidence did you use?

Did you defend your point of view?

What would you do differently if you were writing a politics or economics assignment about the same issue?

You probably used quite informal language to express your opinions and, if with friends, may have used a lot of humour. If you're with like minded people you may not have had to defend your opinion. Instead everyone may have agreed and come up with 'evidence' to confirm it. Often this evidence consists of personal experience, anecdotes (e.g. '..but he's a great TD, my aunt went to see him about...') or even gossip. People also tend to draw on the media (e.g. 'I read somewhere' or 'there was a documentary about...'). If defending your opinion you may have presented more evidence but often this is vague 'e.g. there's research that shows that...' or invokes some authority '..my brother's girlfriend is an economist and she says...' .

Expressing an academic opinion is similar to defending our position over a coffee. However we need to express ourselves more formally and be much more precise about the evidence that we use (i.e. referencing specific sources). We also have to take a much more stringent approach to evidence – a sensational newspaper report or something that happened to a friend is fine for a chat in the pub but it does not count as academic evidence. We have to use credible academic sources to support our academic opinion or argument. For academic purposes we also need to take a more balanced approach to the evidence. In the pub we might cherry-pick examples and evidence that support our own point of view and ignore evidence that refutes it. We can't do this in academic work. We are demonstrating mastery of disciplinary knowledge so we have to show that we are familiar with the body of evidence. Often there may be controversies and/or different ways to interpret the evidence so we have to clearly say why we think that one side or the argument has more merit than the other.

Expressing opinion by using evidence

Essentially we start in different places. When talking and arguing with our friends we have our opinions ready and then we try and come up with evidence to support or justify them. In academic work we should start with the evidence before developing an opinion. The focus always should be on the evidence.

The example below is from Song & Schwarz (2010, p.109). They are discussing the evidence regarding the effects of the way in which information is presented, for example, the fonts used. They describe the findings of a number of separate studies but then go on to synthesise this evidence to make a new point that is their own (highlighted in green).

Novemsky and colleagues (2007) presented the same information about two cordless phones in easy-to-read or difficult-to-read fonts. They observed that 17 per cent of their participants postponed choice when the font was easy to read, whereas 41 per cent did so when the font was difficult to read. Apparently participants misread the difficulty arising from the print font as reflecting the difficulty of making a choice. Supporting this interpretation, the effect was eliminated when the experimenter stated the obvious: 'This may be difficult to read because of the print font'. In this case deferral dropped from 41 per cent to 16 per cent, wiping out the difference between the fonts.

In combination these findings highlight that people are sensitive to their feelings of ease or difficulty but insensitive to where these feelings come from.

Using evidence to support your point

Many students tell us that they are afraid to make a point if they can't reference it. It is crucial that you do reference the sources of information. Hopefully you can see in the example below how the student uses the evidence she had read to make a point of her own (highlighted in green). She took the evidence and made an informed inference based on it. This makes her work very much stronger, it demonstrates that the material is not simply being regurgitated but it is being actively thought about and used to develop an argument – it is 'value added'.

Example: Eating in response to emotions is associated with binge-eating: negative emotions are key triggers for eating binges in clinical populations (Arnow et al. 1995). Evidence indicates that it is related to avoidant coping styles and emotion focused coping (Spoor et al., 2006). It has also been suggested that eating as a way of 'self-medicating' to control mood (Christensen & Brooks, 2006) with sweet, high carbohydrate and fat foods being used to boost low mood. However the mood gains are temporary and this leads to '*..a cycle of cravings and consumption of carbohydrate and fat-rich food*' (Christensen & Brooks, 2006, p.294). Overall this evidence suggests that eating can be used as a coping strategy, particularly for dealing with low mood. The type of food eaten has clear implications for weight.

As a general rule, if your work reads as though it could have been written by anyone whether or not they have ever attended the module, then it's not academic enough.

Critical discussion. What does this mean?

I have to 'critically discuss' as part of my assignment. What does this mean?

In order to critically discuss a topic you have to think logically about what is being said in relevant literature. Interestingly, in our personal lives we critically discuss things all the time (citing various opinions, views and knowledge to back up and expand on a point). Yet when it comes to academic writing we can often be overly cautious and simply describe what other people say rather than analysing what is being said. In academic terms analysis involves **actively** thinking (and writing!) about what various authors have said on a topic and then formally commenting on it. A good 'tip' to ensure you are engaging in critical discussion when writing your assignment is to ask yourself **so what** every now and again and then based on the evidence you have gathered present your own informed opinion. Remember though this takes time as you have to be very familiar with various viewpoints on a subject to tease out exactly what is being said.

My work is not critical enough what does this mean?

My feedback from lecturers always mentions that my work is not critical enough or is lacking in critical discussion but what does this mean? I don't understand what I need to do.

Tips for engaging in critical discussion

- Present the views of others in an objective and balanced manner
- Include literature that both agrees and contrasts with your central argument(s).
- Come to a conclusion or judgement yourself about what is being said (based on your experience or knowledge) and include this where appropriate in the assignment. Usually when you write a paragraph which includes various authors' views on a topic it provides an opportunity for your own 'voice' to shine through on the subject.

An example of critical discussion is provided on the next page.

Example 4: Critical Discussion

Fletcher (2000) states that good writing is not something that happens automatically or by magic but rather occurs when individuals are able to structure sentences and use appropriate words to convey a message. Whitehead (2002) found that developing academic writing skills was troublesome for students. It could be suggested therefore that all students should be educated on academic writing skills (Lloyd, 2007). However, it has been noted that little or no training is provided to students in higher education on how to develop academic writing skills (Foxwell 2008) because there is an expectation that students acquire appropriate skills in secondary school. Moreover, with increased student numbers and diversity within the student population it cannot be assumed that all students have received the same teaching in academic writing. Consequently, there has been much discussion among academics regarding the promotion and development of academic writing. Lloyd (2008) suggests that all students should receive formal education on academic writing skills if they are to develop competence in writing. In fact there is now increasing consensus that academic writing is more than just teaching a series of writing skills, it is an evolving process inextricably linked to students engagement in reading discipline specific literature (Lea and Street, 1998; Crème and Lea, 1999; Lillis 2001, Hodgson 2011; Lea, 2012).

The text overleaf is a good example of critical discussion. The author refers to available evidence on the subject of academic writing skills, and assesses the contribution that the evidence makes to the debate. You can see how the author is considering the evidence to draw some conclusions.

Section 5 Referencing

“Referencing is the acknowledgement of any material used in the writing of your work. It is essential that you indicate from where the information you are using has come. Any statements you make in your work need to be supported by reference to the published medium” (DkIT 2009, pg.1). There are only two essential elements of referencing using the Harvard System: namely citing and reference list.

When working through these examples pay close attention to the specific guidelines in your own institution.

Example 1: Citing sources in your own work

As suggested by **(Arnold and Boggs 1999)** stress is a personal experience that can affect the whole person.

What is wrong with the above?

As suggested by **(Arnold and Boggs 1999)** stress is a personal experience which can affect the whole person.

1. There is no need to put the citation in bold
2. Where the authors' names appear naturally in the text they should not be in parentheses (brackets). Only the year should be in parentheses (brackets).

The citation should appear in the text as follows:

As suggested by Arnold and Boggs (1999) stress is a personal experience which can affect the whole person.

Citations

Example 2

Stress is a personal experience that can affect the whole person Arnold and Boggs (1999).

What is wrong with the above?

Stress is a personal experience that can affect the whole person Arnold and Boggs (1999).

1. The authors' names and date of publication should all be in parenthesis (brackets) at the end of the sentence.

The citation should appear in the text as follows:

Stress is a personal experience that can affect the whole person (Arnold and Boggs 1999).

The Reference List

The reference list should include the following and in the order presented - author, year of publication, title and subtitle, place of publication and publisher.

Example 1

An Bord Altranais, (The Nursing Board) The code of professional conduct for each Nurse and Midwife, April 2000

What is wrong with the above?

1. An Bord Altranais, (The Nursing Board) - area highlighted in green not required
2. The year of publication in wrong place
3. Title should be in Italics
4. Place of publication not provided
5. Publisher not provided

The reference should appear in the reference list as follows:

An Bord Altranais. (2000). *The Code of Professional Conduct for each Nurse and Midwife*. Dublin: An Bord Altranais.

The Reference List

Example 2

Journal of Advanced Nursing, Vol 67, Issue 6, pp 1213-1221, Published June 2011.

Reference list should include the following and in the order presented - author, year of publication, title and subtitle, place of publication and publisher.

What is wrong with the above?

1. No author provided
2. Year of publication provided with errors and in wrong place
3. No title of article provided
4. Title of journal should be in Italics
5. Volume and Issue number evident but error noted in presentation

The reference should appear in the reference list as follows:

Bonner, A. and Lloyd, A. (2011). What information counts at the moment of practice? Information practices of renal nurses. *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, 67 (6), pp. 1213-1221.

Section 6 Feedback from Activities

Feedback on Activity 1 page 6.

Below is one way to rewrite the extract in an academic style.

Research shows that adherence to medication is linked to patients' beliefs about their illnesses (Ogden, 2007). Those who believe that their illnesses are uncontrollable are less likely to adhere to medication.

Feedback on Activity 4 page 14.

Below is one way to rewrite this removing 'this student' and 'this author'.

Focus-groups were used to collect data. The aim of the research was to explore ways in which students' understand and make sense of safe drinking advice. Focus - groups are a good method to explore people's understandings of an issue (Wilkinson, 2008). They provide a very natural way to collect data (Wilkinson, 1999) as they are similar to everyday conversations. For these reasons focus-groups were selected for this study.

Feedback for Activity 5 page 20.

- a. Eisenberger & Lieberman (2004) proposed 'pain overlap theory' which _____ that physical and social pain have a shared basis.

Verbs: argues, discusses, concludes, states.

Either 'argues' or 'states' would be appropriate choices here. The theory is proposed, research would be needed to draw conclusions. While the authors may discuss evidence, ideas or issues, the theory itself does not.

- b. In their study of stress and eustress in student nurses, Gibbons et al., (2008) _____ that clinical placements were an important source of positive experiences.

Verbs: found, argued, reported, discussed

Either 'reported' or 'found' are appropriate here as research findings are being described. The sentence does not imply a discussion and nor is an argument being put forward or described.

c. As Willig (2001) _____ , there is more than one version of Grounded Theory.

*This is known to be true, there are a number of different approaches to Grounded Theory

Verbs: argues, suggests, points out, explains

'Points out' or 'explains' work best here and the choice would depend on the context. As it is well known that there are a number of versions of Grounded Theory this is not an argument or suggestion on the part of Willig, but rather a statement of fact.

d. Black & Wiliam (1997) _____ the evidence regarding the effects of feedback on learning and _____ that the effects are potentially large.

Verbs for the first blank: discuss, identify, explain, describe

'Discuss' is the best choice. 'Describe' could be used, but would imply the findings are simply described rather than analysed in any way.

Verbs for the second blank: describe, discuss, recommend, conclude

'Conclude' works here as it accurately conveys the sense of a conclusion based on a discussion to review of the evidence

Feedback on Activity 6 page 23

1. Ogden, J. (2007). *Health Psychology: A textbook*. 4th ed., Buckingham: Open University Press.

This is a relevant academic text book so it is an appropriate source.

2. <http://www.smokinginengland.info/>

This website collates and presents the results from the Smoking Toolkit study funded by the UK Department of Health and Cancer Research UK. The resources on the site are academic ones so this would be an appropriate source. However, when referencing you would need to be specific about the specific resource or pages on the site that have used, simply including the web address would NOT be sufficient.

For example: *West R (2006) Background smoking cessation rates in England:www.smokinginengland.info/Ref/paper2.pdf*. This would be cited in your essay as West (2006). This refers specifically to the section on background smoking rates.

3. Carr, A. (1999). *Easy Way to Stop Smoking*. London: Penguin.

This is a well known self-help book, it is NOT an appropriate academic source.

Feedback on Activity 6 page 23

4. www.nicorette.ie This website is all about the Nicorette brand of nicotine replacement therapies and has tips for quitting. It is NOT an appropriate academic source. If you were to use something like this in an essay on promoting smoking cessation your marker has to ask why you are not getting your information from the research literature.
5. Brugha, R., Tully, N., Dicker, P., Shelley, E., Ward, M. and McGee, H. (2009). *SLÁN 2007: Survey of Lifestyle, Attitudes and Nutrition in Ireland. Smoking Patterns in Ireland: Implications for Policy and Services*. Department of Health and Children. Dublin: The Stationery Office. Available http://www.dohc.ie/publications/slan_smoking.html. [accessed 3rd May, 2011]. This is an officially funded report and is an appropriate academic source.
6. Everson-Hock, E.S., Taylor, A.H., Ussher, M. (2010). A qualitative perspective on multiple health behaviour change: views of smoking cessation advisors who promote physical activity. *The Journal of Smoking Cessation*, 5 (1), pp. 7-14. This is a journal article and is an appropriate academic source.

Feedback on Activity 7 page 26

1. A minor change (highlighted and underlined below in green) was made to the text that appeared in the original article by Whitehead (2002) - it should be noted that this is not paraphrasing.

Rolfe 1997 identifies that writing is one of the most important skills that the critical and questioning nurse can adopt; is an integral skill that defines who we are and what we think (D, Whitehead MSc RGN "Issues and Innovations in Nursing education, Alexander Pope 1711)

2. The above text could be misleading as it gives the impression that the words are the writers own words. To avoid unintentionally plagiarising the student should have used a direct quote as follows:

"Rolfe (1997) identifies that writing is one of the most important skills that the critical and questioning nurse can adopt; is an integral skill that defines who we are and what we think" (Whitehead, 2002, p. 499). However using quotation marks correctly does not demonstrate that the student understands what he/she has read.

3. The student has made an error when citing in the text and it should have appeared in the student's text as follows:

Rolfe (1997, cited in Whitehead, 2002, p. 499) identifies that writing (here the student would continue by paraphrasing the authors ideas rather than using a direct quote from the source).

Feedback on Activity 8 page 30.

- a. Phantom limb pains were known since antiquity and there is an elaborate folklore surrounding them. After Lord Nelson lost his arm during an unsuccessful attack he experienced phantom limb pains including the sensation of fingers digging into his phantom palm. The emergence of these strange sensations led the sealord to say that his phantom was a 'direct proof of the existence of the soul' (Ramachandran & Hirstein, 1998).

This is pretty much a word-for word copy of the text. Very minor changes are made to a few words. The source is referenced, however this still verges on plagiarism as the words used are not the students. This is NOT a good use of the source make a point, i.e. makes their own of it.

- b. Lord Nelson lost his arm in battle and then experienced very bad phantom limb pain – he felt that his fingers were digging into the palm of the missing hand. He considered this to be proof that the soul exists (Riddoch, 1941) – if the arm can survive being annihilated then why not the whole person?

This is simply a rewording of the original, it is not paraphrased. The use of the Riddoch reference is inappropriate as it is very unlikely that the student has read it, so to include it like this is misleading. The original source of the information is not referenced at all. This is NOT a good use of the information.

- c. Phantom limb pain has a long history. For example, Ramachandran & Hirstein (1998) discuss the case of Lord Nelson who believed that his phantom limb pain was evidence that the soul existed, as the limb seemed to 'live' after death or destruction.

This is a good use of the information. The source is referenced and the student explains the information in their own words and uses it to

Conclusion

Academic writing can be challenging but for the student who actively engages in reading discipline specific literature it is possible to find your academic voice at an early stage in your chosen programme of study.

We hope that you have found this booklet useful and would welcome your feedback on any aspect included or that you feel could have been included to benefit students in the future. You can contact the any of the author's with your feedback at the following e-mail addresses:

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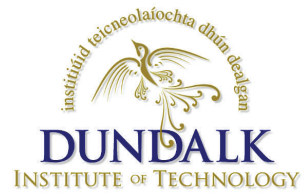
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