Moving up to higher education

Writing academically
Tips to help you prepare for higher education study

You'll be aware that you need to develop your academic writing for higher education - but how? Will you need to use a lot of long words and complicated sentences? Will you be expected to include some original idea that no-one else has ever written about to get good marks?

Actually neither of these are what good academic writing is about. Rather you will need to be able to communicate complicated ideas clearly, know how to support the things you say with evidence, and explain your thinking.

Four things you can do to develop your academic writing practices for higher education:
- Communicate your ideas clearly
- Structure your work effectively
- Use references as evidence - without plagiarising
- Learn what it means to 'be original'

Communicating your ideas clearly

In higher education, you are going to be asked to think about, explain and discuss a complex range of ideas and arguments. You may be bringing together ideas from a number of different scholars that you have read, for instance: or showing what the results of your own primary research mean in the context of a particular problem. In either case, it's important to write clearly so that your reader can be certain that they understand what you're saying, and that you understand what you're writing about.

Avoid long, complex sentences... You're less likely to lose track of what you are trying to say if you write in shorter sentences. If you need to link a number of ideas together in a sentence, make sure you separate them with appropriate punctuation: commas, semi-colons, colons and parentheses.

Longer words don't make your writing more academic... A good piece of advice is to 'write to express, not to impress'. You are looking for the words that will best communicate your ideas. Sometimes these will be long complicated words and sometimes they will be shorter. What you need is the most appropriate words for the job they have to do.

Give your reader signposts... If you tell your reader what you're going to say, they will know what to look out for. Include a few sentences in your introduction on how you are going to answer the question: something like, "This essay will discuss the proposition that Brown’s thesis is flawed. The proposition will be examined by first considering x, then looking at y, and finally z. Conclusions will then be drawn about the validity of Brown’s thesis." Then start each of your sections with a topic sentence (or sub-heading, in a report) that shows what it is you are going to be discussing.

Watch out for informality and vagueness... You are trying to reduce any possibility of your reader misunderstanding what you are trying to say, so aim to avoid the kind of language that might be interpreted differently by different readers.
Structuring your work

Structuring your work carefully is another strategy you can use to make your writing clear to your reader. The first step is selecting the information to include in your writing that will make the best argument or discussion. It isn’t usually possible to write about everything you will discover about the topic in your research, so choose a few things to discuss in detail that will demonstrate your understanding. You are aiming to show your reader that you can use what you’ve learned to make a meaningful statement - not that you have read every book in the library!

Structuring a report... If you are asked to write a report, you will probably be told which headings you should use to structure your writing. Then you will need to decide which pieces of your information go in which section.

Structuring an essay... If you are asked to write an essay, you will usually be expected to work out a structure for yourself. You will always need to include an introduction that sets up your discussion and a conclusion that draws your discussion together, but there are many different ways you might choose to structure the main body of your discussion. The important thing is to keep the structure simple (not more than three or four sections) and your discussion focused - remember you can’t include everything!

Make a plan... It doesn’t have to be very detailed, but it will help you to stay focused on the topic, and make sure you don’t forget something important. There are various ways to plan an essay: pick one that suits you.

Check that you’ve answered the question... The most frequent complaint by markers is that the student did not answer the question. When you proof read, check that you have shown how your arguments and information are relevant and are building an answer to the question. If you are writing a report, you may be told who the report is for (an imaginary client, for instance). This is part of the assignment brief: when you write, keep this reader in mind.

Using references as evidence and avoiding plagiarism

In higher education study, using references and citations is one of the most important practices, as it makes your work academically valid and shows how it fits into the web of academic knowledge. You will probably already be used to including references to and citations for the materials you have used when researching your assignments, and compiling a list of these as your bibliography. In higher education you will be expected to develop these practices.

Learn the rules!... they sometimes seem petty, but showing that you are able to follow the rules of referencing carefully and meticulously is one of the ways you show that your work is academic. Find out which referencing style your department uses, and how they want you to use it for in-text citations and bibliographies.

Acknowledge every idea you got from someone else’s work… not just direct quotes, but paraphrases, descriptions and references to (e.g. Brown’s research on mice showed… (Brown, 2005).) If this makes your work look like a mass of references and nothing else, you probably need to include some more critical analysis.

Use references to support your arguments - not to replace them... if you include a direct quote, always discuss it and show how it helps to build your argument. Try to avoid long quotes (more than a sentence) unless you are really going to discuss every line. You will be marked for your own words, not other people’s!

Avoid unintentional plagiarism… You may not mean to use someone else’s work without acknowledgement, but the consequences can be the same as if you did (failing the assignment, or the

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module, or even the course). Practice good note-making - ALWAYS make a note of the details and page number of what you are reading next to your notes on it and mark up direct quotes carefully to distinguish them from your own ideas. If you have the perfect quote or argument, but you don't know (and can't find out) where it came from to reference it, DON'T USE IT. It's not worth the risk.

**Being original**

It's confusing when you're told you need to be original in your thinking - but then you're told that you need more references to other people's work too. In higher education, being original is rarely about having a brilliant idea that no-one has ever had before. Rather it means that you will be expected to take different sources of information and think about how they fit (or don't fit) together, so that you can work out your own interpretation and understanding of the topic.

**Always start from your own ideas**... so that you are less likely to fall into the trap of uncritically believing the first scholar you read. Before you start doing detailed research, take what you know already about the topic, and use it to make an educated guess about the answer to the question or main message about the topic you are researching. Then test that idea against your reading or research.

**Your conclusion is for summing up**... not for adding speculative ideas with no evidence to support them. If you have a brilliant original idea, and can show how you worked it out and how it fits into the evidence you have, then include it in the main body of your work.

**Don't worry!**... your work will naturally be original, if you always think critically and have a bit of confidence in your own interpretations and evaluations. If you and your best friend both read the same books and articles, attended the same lectures, and wrote an answer to the same question, they would still both be different and original, provided you do your own thinking and don't uncritically believe other people's ideas.