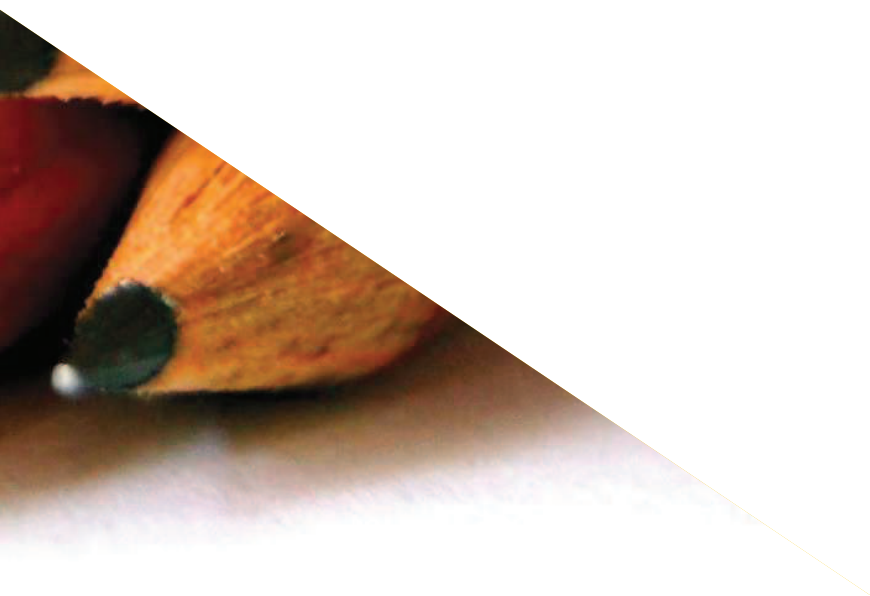


WRITING SKILLS

AT UNIVERSITY



You need to develop and practise a variety of writing skills to perform well at university. The most important of these are:

- Writing notes
- Writing assignments, for example essays
- Writing reports as part of research projects
- Writing a thesis or mini-thesis in your final year of study

WRITING NOTES

Writing notes of important points is a skill that is not taught at university. This is something students have to learn on their own. Writing notes usually takes place in three different contexts:

- In a lecture setting, where you take notes of what a lecturer says
- In a study setting, where you write notes to summarise information in textbooks and other material
- In a research setting, where you need to take notes from a variety of books and articles in order to use them in a report or assignment

TAKING NOTES IN A LECTURE SETTING

It is usually impossible to take down everything that the lecturer says. Therefore you must learn to interpret and summarise the content of the lecture by writing down the key points. You don't have to write full sentences that are grammatically correct. It is more important that you understand what you have written. Accept that you won't be able to get everything down. It is more important that you follow the logical argument or explanation as the lecturer speaks, and jot down keywords and phrases that will help you recall his words when you later read through your notes. Your text book and handouts will provide the full context, so don't get anxious. Think of yourself as a sponge that absorbs the information as the lecturer speaks. A few drops of water will inevitably escape!

TIP -

Notes do not have to be neat, but ensure that you're able to read what you have written.



HOW TO TAKE GOOD NOTES

- Notes have to reflect the information that is provided by the lecturer. These can include presentation slides and video footage that are used in the lecture.
 - Always date your notes. This keeps your notes in order and will be important later in the year when you need to study for tests and exams.
 - Give a heading to your notes for each lecture – what is the topic under discussion? This is helpful when you later study from your notes. Aim to take down only the most important points.
1. You can identify them by doing the following:
 2. Take careful note of the difference in emphasis in a lecture: some concepts are carefully explained and examples provided, whereas others are mentioned in passing and only a brief example may be given. Make sure that you make a note of the concepts that have received most emphasis.
 3. When the lecturer repeats a certain term, date or topic, make a note of it.
 4. When the lecturer writes information on the board, make a note of it.
 5. Look out for organising phrases when the lecturer speaks, for example: ‘There are two points of view on ...’, ‘The first reason is ...’, ‘The problem is ...’, ‘In conclusion ...’. Phrases such as these help you to write and organise your notes and also help you to listen well. (For example, listen for the two points and number them in your notes; listen for the first reason and for subsequent reasons and number them in your notes; listen and note the problem and make a note of the solution if it is given in the lecture, etc.).
 6. Make a note of any summaries that the lecturer may give at the end of the lecture.



- Don't try to write complete sentences. Use abbreviations and personal shorthand that you understand. Examples are: e.g. (for example), NB (very important), adv & disadv (advantages and disadvantages).
- Always try to write your notes in your own words, but the following should be copied down exactly:
 1. FORMULAS
 2. DEFINITIONS
 3. SPECIFIC FACTS
- If you miss a point and realise too late that it might be important, write a key word about it in your notes and mark it with a star. Continue listening and making notes of the rest of the lecture. You can always ask your friends after the lecture what the point was.
- Remember that you can always add to your notes after the lecture. Try to spend 10 minutes at some stage after the lecture to go through your notes. Add more points and more detail where necessary.

TAKING NOTES FROM BOOKS AND ARTICLES IN STUDY OR RESEARCH SETTINGS

- When making notes from your textbook or other material in a study setting, take special note of headings and topic sentences. These will help you structure your notes.
- When taking notes from a book or article for research purposes, always take down the title, author, the date of publication, the publisher and the page numbers from which you made notes. This is crucial when you use your notes later for assignments, as you will have to write citations and references. (See the section 'Citing sources'.)

WRITING ASSIGNMENTS SUCH AS ESSAYS

During your university career you will be presented with a number of assignments. Assignments may take different forms, such as essays, problem-solving assignments and reports. Each of these needs to be approached in a different way.

HOW TO ILLUSTRATE YOUR ANSWER IN YOUR ESSAY

One of the most common mistakes that students make when writing an essay is that they don't answer the question. You may be able to write on the topic and may thoroughly engage with the information that you have researched, but this does not necessarily mean that you are answering the question.

To make sure you answer the question you must understand it. Read and re-read the question, taking note of specific words that tell you how to answer it. Highlight these key words. There are also other words that identify what information must be in your answer. Circle these words.

PLAN WHAT YOU ARE GOING TO WRITE

There is usually a large amount of material that needs to be carefully organised before you begin writing your essay. An effective way is to draw a spider diagram or a mind map of what you need to answer and the information you need to provide in your essay.

WHY BOTHER TO PLAN?

Planning your essay ensures that you include all the information that you are required to provide. It also helps you write an essay with a clear argument and a logical structure. In addition, planning ensures that you make consistent connections throughout the essay between the information you provide and the question that was asked.

WRITING YOUR ESSAY

● INTRODUCTION

Your introduction must show how you are going to structure your information in the remainder of the essay, identifying the main points that you will address, as well as how they relate to the question.

● BODY

The body of the essay is divided into a number of paragraphs. Each paragraph gives a section of the information and must correspond with what you wrote in your introduction. You must provide a clear argument, backing up each of your points with the evidence that you collected. You can quote from books and other research material to emphasise a point or to explain why you are making some claim. However, use quotes sparingly. Do not fill your essay with another person's words. Your lecturers want to know what you think, and are more interested in your own words and explanations of concepts.

● CONCLUSION

When writing your conclusion you must briefly summarise your argument and findings. Emphasise your main ideas and how they answer the question.



TIP -

The conclusion summarises the main points and leads the reader back to the question. The conclusion should be brief and not include any new information.

RESEARCH PROJECTS

In some subjects you may be given a research project. Your lecturers will provide you with full details of what will be expected from you and how you should conduct your research and present your findings. The following is a generalised and brief description of some of the issues involved in research projects.

COLLECTING DATA

This involves gathering information yourself, and does not refer to using secondary resources. For example, data collection can involve interviewing people or doing experiments in a laboratory setting. If you need to interview people, you must design a questionnaire first. Similarly, if you need to collect data by doing experiments, you must first design your experiment. The following criteria will give you guidance in designing suitable questions for an interview:

- Design each question carefully, thinking about what you need to find out for your research project.
- Think about how you need to use the data collected. For example, will you need to do statistical calculations? This will help you to design good questions.
- When you collect data, avoid personal questions or questions that will provoke an emotional response. Try keeping your questions fact driven rather than opinion-based. (However, in some subjects, such as Psychology, and depending on the research topic, this may not be possible.)
- Don't ask confusing questions that could be construed differently by different people.
- Be clear and concise.
- If you need to do statistical calculations with responses, always phrase such questions so that the response is given in numeric or coded form, rather than the respondent's own words. For example 'On a scale of 1 to 10, with 1 being Extremely Miserable, and 10 being Very Happy, how would you rate your state of mind when you fail a test?' is a better question than 'Describe your state of mind when you fail a test?'
- Make sure your questions make sense and follow on from each other in a logical way.
- Use simple language. Keep in mind that not all your respondents may be fluent in the language that you have used to compile the questionnaire or conduct the interview.

RESEARCH REPORTS

A written report is used to describe an investigation or enquiry, or to present the results of a research project. It should be written in a specific format – your university will have its own guidelines for writing research reports, and you should read them carefully before writing your report. A report should consist of evidence, findings and recommendations. The introduction to a research report discusses the purpose of the research (the research question), how the research was conducted and briefly indicates your findings. The body of the report explains the method of investigation, and discusses your findings in detail. Finally a conclusion states your recommendations, why they are important and how they answer or address the research question. In the conclusion you can also identify possible research that may be undertaken in future to further illuminate the research question. Be as objective as possible when writing your report.

PLAGIARISM

Plagiarism is copying what someone else has written or taking somebody else's ideas or words and presenting them as your own, without acknowledging the source. Even if you do not quote verbatim from a book or article, you still need to acknowledge it in your reference list if you made use of it. When you paraphrase (rewrite in your own words someone else's ideas or thoughts) without acknowledging the source, it is still considered plagiarism. It is therefore extremely important that you always acknowledge your sources in all your work. Universities consider plagiarism in a very serious light. If you are found guilty of plagiarism you may not be allowed to continue your studies. If you are unsure whether something in your report or assignment needs to be acknowledged, check with your lecturer or tutor.

To acknowledge a source you insert a citation in the body of the text, and add a full reference in your reference list at the end of your assignment, essay or report.



TIP -

Different universities, and sometimes academic faculties within a university, may follow different formats for citing and referencing in academic writing. Check with your lecturer which type of reference style your faculty requires, and how to use it.

CITING SOURCES

When writing assignments, research reports or theses, you are required to find both secondary and primary sources. This involves looking for books, journal articles and websites that will give you information on the topic you are researching. These sources must be cited in your work whenever you refer to them. This includes quotations as well as paraphrasing information. It is therefore important to write down the details of a book or article when you make notes from it. This will help prevent accidentally plagiarising someone else's work. 'Citing' means to refer to the author of your source, the date of publication, and where necessary the page number.

- When using quotations, use the original words and put them in quotation marks in your text.
- In brackets identify the author, the year the book was published and on which page(s) you found the information. See the examples below.
- Add the full reference to the source in your reference list. This will include more details such as the title of the publication, publisher, place of publication, etc. See the examples on page 46.

EXAMPLES OF DIFFERENT REFERENCE STYLES

- American Psychological Association (APA)
- Documentary note style
- Harvard
- IEEE
- Modern Language Association (MLA)
- Vancouver

EXAMPLES OF CITING AND REFERENCING A SOURCE

In an assignment for Psychology, you may find the following:

1. *Animal languages can be extremely complex, as evidenced by the different calls of vervet monkeys (Diamond, 2002).*

(Note that there is no direct quotation, but the information has been paraphrased and therefore the source has to be acknowledged. The page number does not have to be included because it is not a direct quotation.)

2. *He clearly states that ‘virtually every claim of animal behaviour suggesting elements of human language is greeted with scepticism by many scientists.’ (Diamond, 2002:130).*

(Note that here there is a direct quotation from the source. Quotation marks are used and the author, year of publication of book, as well as the page(s) on which the quote can be found, are specified in brackets.)

In addition to the citations in the text of your assignment or report, you need to include the full reference in your reference list, which usually appears at the end. For the above examples, the full reference will be:

Diamond, J (2002). The rise and fall of the third chimpanzee. How our animal heritage affects the way we live. London: Vintage.

● HOW TO REFERENCE AN INTERNET WEBSITE

When you use information from Internet websites for an assignment, you need to include the reference in your reference list. Take note of the following:

1. The name of the author (if known) of the article or web post
2. The title of the article or web post
3. The web address (URL) for the website
4. The date on which you accessed the information

AN EXAMPLE OF A REFERENCE TO THE INTERNET:

Richardson, P W. 'When Animals Speak'. Columbia Journal of Language Studies. Available online at <http://www.coljls.org/2014/dec/when-animals-speak/>. Accessed 22 Nov. 2014.