

# Mastering Academic Writing



# Introduction

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Learning to write in an academic style can prove challenging for students. How do you clearly and concisely put across information, show your sources, and ensure your writing is accurate? There are a lot of things to be thinking about and, in the move from school to university it can feel as though there is a wide gulf of understanding to jump. This Snapshot aims to provide you with some introductory advice to help you master academic writing.

**'There is no one correct style of academic writing, but in general it should attempt to be accurate, impersonal and objective.'**

*– The Essentials of Academic Writing for International Students*

## 5 Key Tips for...

1. The Basics of Academic Writing
2. Sources and Referencing
3. Plagiarism
4. Editing and Revision
5. Proofreading

## The Basics of Academic Writing

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**'There are few fixed rules for academic style that apply to all disciplines, so students should study examples of writing in their own subject area, and then aim to develop their own "voice".'**

– *The Essentials of Academic Writing for International Students*

As the above quote says, there are few fixed rules in academic writing but those that exist are important to remember. Firstly, your writing needs to be concise, clear, well-structured and backed up by evidence. When you read it back, every line should enhance the reader's understanding. It pays to be ruthless and cut any words and sentences that don't add to what you have written.

Your writing should be formal in style and in tone, but don't be tempted to use long words and convoluted sentences in order to show off or to up your word count. It's an easy trap to fall into but good academic writing is never needlessly complicated.

**'For most assignments, students are expected to read a range of sources, often containing conflicting views on a topic. In some cases, the contrast between the various views may be the focus of the task.'**

– *The Essentials of Academic Writing for International Students*

The best academic writing demonstrates an understanding of the subject under discussion and is backed up by accurately referenced evidence. As Stephen Bailey states in *The Essentials of Academic Writing for International Students*,

**'It is important to compare a range of views to show that you are familiar with different and conflicting views on a topic.'**

## Sources and Referencing

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**'Without adequate sources and reading your essays and assignments are likely to score poor marks. This is because your essays need to show how your ideas enter into an intellectual conversation with, are informed by, or even challenge the work of others.'**

– *Academic Writing and Dyslexia*

The sources you use in your academic writing are your chance to demonstrate the breadth of your research and reading. Use summaries of, or quotations from carefully chosen sources to back up your arguments and opinions. In *Academic Writing: A Handbook for International Students*, Stephen Bailey states:

**'Students are expected to take a critical approach to sources, which means to challenge what they read rather than accepting it as reliable. Clearly this approach requires a good understanding of written texts.'**

Spend time thinking about the sources you use. Do they back up your argument? Or are you taking the quote out of its context? Do you fully understand what it is saying? Remember to read sources that challenge the path your thoughts are taking. Don't be afraid to challenge them in return. Why do you think that the ideas you are putting across are correct?

There is no need to quote everything directly. Instead you can summarise the thoughts of others, just remember that accurate referencing is essential to avoid plagiarism. You must accurately reference every source you use. A guide on your department's preferred method of referencing will be found in your course handbook. If you are unsure that you are doing it correctly talk to your lecturer.

**'Summarising and paraphrasing are normally used together in essay writing. Summarising aims to reduce information to a suitable length, allowing the writer to condense lengthy sources into a concise form, while paraphrasing means changing the wording of a text so that it is significantly different from the original source, without changing the meaning. Both are needed to avoid the risk of plagiarism.'**

– *Academic Writing: A Handbook for International Students*

## Plagiarism

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**'In academic work, ideas and words are seen as private property belonging to the person who first thought or wrote them. Plagiarism means taking ideas or words from a source, such as a book or journal without giving credit ... to the author.'**

– *The Essentials of Academic Writing for International Students*

It is essential that you take care to show the origin of the sources you use, that you reference clearly and accurately, and that all your ideas are your own. Plagiarism, even unintentionally, can have serious consequences. It can result in expulsion from your course and your university.

**'... it is not a good excuse to say that you didn't know the rules of plagiarism, or that you didn't have time to write in your own words... anything that is not common knowledge or your own ideas and research (published or not) must be cited and referenced.'**

– *The Essentials of Academic Writing for International Students*

It is wise to keep a notebook handy as you research, to note down the details of each quotation or idea that you intend to include or summarise in your work so that you don't run the risk of plagiarising another's work.

## Editing and Revision

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**'If you wish to make your writing pleasant to the reader, then you should be prepared to spend enough time editing and polishing your drafts. As most readers are easily distracted, your main task as a writer consists in communicating information and knowledge in an interesting and engaging way.'**

*– Mastering Academic Writing in the Sciences*

However pleased you may be with your first draft it can be better. It doesn't matter how well practiced you are at essay or report writing, or how long you took constructing your work, it can still be improved.

Go through your work with an eye on the structure; does it flow logically? Are there any sentences that could be clearer? Is there a better word that could be used? Have you answered the question you were asked, and have you unequivocally given clear, well-supported arguments? Have you any further thoughts you need to add?

Take time to think about all these things and carefully edit your work, revising time and again until you are completely happy with it.

**'Revision is all about organising ideas in a way that makes the text flow according to a logical argument ... Revision typically proceeds from the broader items (chapters, sections) through to paragraphs and finally to individual sentences, without getting lost in details until the overall text is properly structured.'**

*– Mastering Academic Writing in the Sciences*

## Proofreading

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*The Essentials of Academic Writing for International Students* states that:

**'Proofreading means checking your work for small errors that may make it more difficult for the reader to understand exactly what you want to say.'**

Proofreading, especially when you have already edited your work multiple times, can feel like an unnecessary chore. And it is not easy. We can become so familiar with our work that we stop seeing what is really there and that's when we can miss errors.

**'Some people tend to identify proofreading with spellchecking but this is only one aspect of it. The key purpose of proofreading your work is to detect and correct not just typographical errors but also any mistakes in grammar, punctuation and references. It also implies checking that your text is formatted consistently and adheres to specific editorial conventions, as prescribed by different journals and universities [sic] guidelines.'**

– *Mastering Academic Writing in the Sciences*

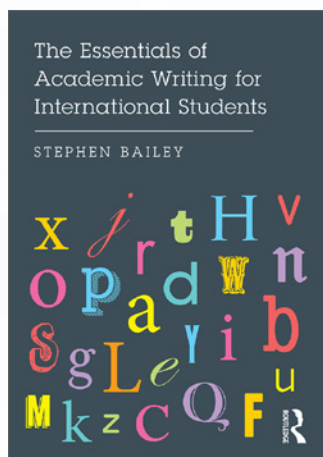
When you have finished all the rest of the work on your essay or report, it's time to proofread. Read through your work again looking for typographical and grammatical mistakes. It is often wise to leave it a day or two after finishing before you proofread to give your brain some distance from the work. You will be a lot more likely to pick up errors that way. Read slowly and don't depend on your computer to highlight errors. For example, they won't pick up when you have typed 'form' instead of 'from'.

It is virtually impossible for your work to always be error free, but you need to try your best to make sure it is near perfect. After all, a simple typo can change the meaning of what you are saying. It can also look careless and that carelessness can lose you marks. If you worry that you won't be able to pick up all the errors, ask a friend to look at it for you or pay a professional proofreader.

**'I have often read theses or reports littered with grammar mistakes or spelling typos. Minor as these issues may seem at first, they often portray a very unfavourable impression of the author as someone careless who did not take time to do things properly.'**

– *Mastering Academic Writing in the Sciences*

## References



**The Essentials of Academic Writing for International Students**

**Stephen Bailey**

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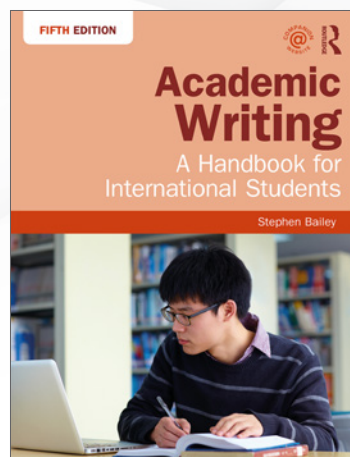
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A Handbook for International Students

**Stephen Bailey**

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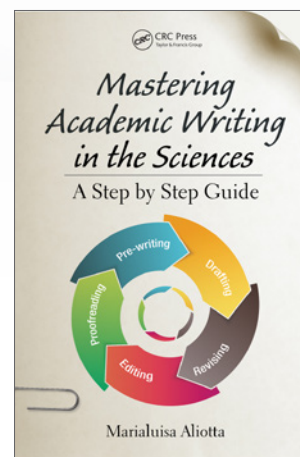
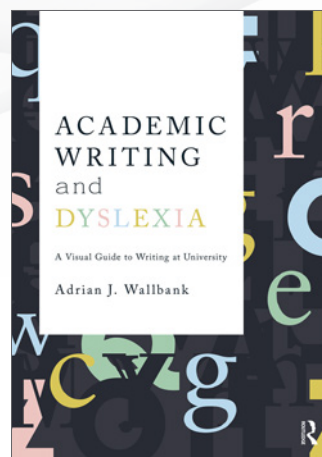
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