Academic literacy is an essential tool for the achievement of academic success and, ultimately, career goals. This new edition of *Academic Literacy* covers all the necessary skills and competencies for constructive and successful academic study. Not only does it focus on reading, writing, listening and verbal communication, but also on developing thinking skills, possibly the core competency needed at this level of study.

The book exposes students to: understanding and engaging with academic study; developing vocabulary; reading for study purposes; argument; paraphrasing and summarising; writing paragraphs; assignment writing; studying; examination skills; and managing time and stress.

**New to the Second Edition:**
- Chapter on study skills
- Expanded section on referencing and how to avoid plagiarism
- New information on how to evaluate material on the internet for academic purposes.

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Academic Literacy

Litha Beekman, Cecilia Dube, Herman Potgieter and Jenni Underhill
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Introduction

Herman Potgieter

There is something both exciting and sad at the beginning of each academic year. The television news shows thousands of students queuing at university campuses to register for the first time. The annual migration of school leavers to the higher-education institutions of South Africa is an exciting time but one cannot help feeling at the same time a certain dread. Thousands of young, very keen people leave their safe and known worlds to migrate to the uncertainty and new experiences of the university or college environment. For a large number of them, the dream is short-lived and brutally interrupted by the new reality: demanding schedules, classes taught by people who seem to speak another language, and tests and assessments that come at you like missiles out of the dark and leaving you with nowhere to hide. It’s a world of very little compassion and even less help when you need it most.

This book is aimed at filling the gap between the world students know and are familiar with, and the challenges of the academic environment, which they often find confusing and intimidating. Passing courses and making progress with your studies has very little to do with pure intelligence – a lot of the most successful students have simply learnt the survival skills, which they use to their advantage.

A few basic skills could ensure your survival at university. More importantly, though, some of these skills are also the foundation for a successful career – doing your university studies is, after all, part of the process of preparing for the life of work.

Superficial involvement in your studies means that you will only study to pass the examinations and class tests, and do just enough to get a pass mark. It means that you’ll have lots of time for the things that are the essential fun students have a right to: sleeping off the party night until twelve o’clock the next day; bunking class to shoot the breeze with your mates; and finding out how easy it is to read a page in your textbook after you have crossed out all the words with more than two syllables.

The committed student, however, knows that deeper levels of involvement and early adoption of the academic way of doing things are what separates the top performers from the ‘also-ran’ students in the class. The first chapter of this book will help you start to uncover the complexities of the academic environment and help you understand the way in which you are required to think, reflect and do the required reading and writing to become a successful student.

There is a different language that students need to discover and master when they enter the higher-education environment. You need to find a new voice and be able to use it effectively when you argue and explain academic concepts, when you write assignments and examinations, and when you interact with other people in the academic environment. Familiarising yourself with academic language and how to
use it when you write is the focus of Chapter 2. The chapter aims to introduce you to the essentials – although becoming proficient in using this language will take you most of your junior years at the institution and it may only be during your postgraduate years that you will be able to look back and fully understand how this new voice you have discovered influenced and enriched your world. By then, when someone says to you: ‘I’m highly intoxicated by the exuberance of your philosophy’, you’ll be able to bounce back with more than just, ‘What⁈’

Researchers are telling us that reading is a dying skill among the younger generation. People who read for pleasure, personal enrichment or self-education are declining in numbers. Reading remains, however, an essential gateway to unlocking knowledge. Chapter 3 guides you on developing your reading skills and will hopefully make of you a more adventurous reader. The world of books promises not only to unlock huge treasures of knowledge, but it also remains key to helping us understand the world we live in, and often provides us with a better understanding of ourselves and our own role in that world. So, if you always wanted to know what you are doing here … read a book! Even if it is the Google Maps edition. Just read something!

Being a good academic or a good student means being able to have a point of view that you are able to substantiate with good, scientific and objective facts. The art of the well-balanced and informed argument is not the exclusive turf of politicians – it is also a skill that helps managers get the resources they need to complete projects; it helps the marketer convince the client of the need to buy a product; it is essential to enable the entrepreneur to gain access to financial or other resources held by a bank or other lender. When you watch people arguing, you may think that the winner is the loudest talker! Chapter 4 provides you with some of the tools for building good arguments and establishes the base you could use for getting what you want in life. Now, is that a winner or what! But this does not mean that you will then have the insight and understanding to argue with your mother when she tells you, ‘Because I say so!’ It’s the law of the universe: some people you do not argue with.

Because plagiarising and the theft of academic material have been made easier by the Internet, academic institutions have gained access to electronic tools that make this sort of thing almost impossible to hide. If we are to learn, we need to stand on the shoulders of the people who have done it before and have developed the theories, have done the research and spent years studying the subject. By citing their works as references, we acknowledge these intellectual pioneers and show the respect they deserve for having been the new thinkers of their time. Chapter 5 helps you with the skills of referencing, paraphrasing and summarising. If you practise long enough and do this well enough, you’ll be able to let the marker get the impression that you know Sigmund Freud and Abraham Maslow personally because you quote their work so well.

Just as a rainwater tank is only able to deliver water at the tap if there has been water running into it at the top, people who do not read are often not able to write at the
levels demanded by academic institutions. Finding a well-written paragraph in an assignment is a rare occurrence and tells the marker of a student who is dedicated, focused and serious about being a good student. These are the students who score good grades. Familiarising yourself with the content of Chapter 6 will set you on the road to getting your hard work recognised and appreciated.

Assignment writing fills many students with unreasonable fear and panic. Being able to write a good assignment is the culmination of the skills taught throughout the book. Chapter 7 helps you to understand the basic requirements to writing good assignments – but your exploration of the chapter may not deliver the most important skill of all: good assignments take time to write and no amount of skill will ever be a substitute for planning and building your assignments up over a period of days or even weeks. Remember to hand the thing in on time, though. Academics have the most irritating habit of wanting things by their deadlines and they stick to this in spite of ample scientific evidence suggesting that brilliance takes time.

Learning to learn may seem something of overkill to most people. If you have just completed high school and been subjected to all the demands inherent in completing it, why would you need a chapter on study skills, you may ask. Chapter 8 looks at some practical suggestions that will make the task of studying a little more fun and a little less dreary. All right, I concede I am lying because it will perhaps never be fun – but at least it will be less painful.

Examinations make most people break out in a cold sweat. It is a sad time of the year when gloom hangs over the campus like a thick fog. People are jumpy and lose their appetite for the meals they used to crave earlier in the year. Some even lose their appetite for life and want to crawl into a dark cupboard to wait for the examination ghost to pass. The information in Chapter 9 will help you, slowly but surely, lose your fear of examinations and put you in charge of the process. There are certain skills that students never discover, which can make the experience a lot less traumatic. It may perhaps be asking too much to hope that it will turn exams into huge fun, but writing an examination need not be a dark and bleak experience for you at all. I think I may be lying again, and admitting having lied twice on the same page could seriously impede my writing career – so, just write those exams and get it over with. It is, after all, not the end of the world. (That normally comes about when the results are published.)

This book was written in an easy and accessible way. We hope that it will help you to become a successful student. And, even better if it helps you to find and nurture the skills that will make you a lifelong learner!

_They say a little knowledge is a dangerous thing. They are completely wrong. We all have only a little knowledge. The dangerous thing is being satisfied with that._

R. J. S. Parsons
The purpose of this chapter is to orientate students to the demands of academic study and underline the personal responsibility of students to acquire the knowledge, skills, values and attitudes needed to succeed in academic studies and, later, in the workplace and career life.

After studying this chapter, students should be able to:
• demonstrate an understanding of the demands of academic study;
• know what knowledge, skills, attitudes and values are required to succeed in higher education;
• understand the requirements of academic tasks and assignments;
• understand the requirements of academic reading and writing; and
• understand what links reading, thinking and writing in academic study.

1.1 Introduction
Academic skills are important for success in both higher education and in the workplace. Once you have acquired these skills, you can apply them throughout your career. Basic academic skills, such as reading and writing, are the foundation for studying. When you develop your reading and writing skills, other general skills, such as thinking and communicating also develop. Together, the foundational skills (reading and writing) and the general skills (thinking and communicating) are critical when doing academic assignments at higher-education level. Academic tasks at this level require thinking skills, such as the identification of problems and issues, analysis of issues, reasoning different points of an argument, evaluating and weighing up the strengths and weaknesses of each point, coming to a logical conclusion, making recommendations and writing critical reports. These skills are also essential life skills to manage your personal life and career, and they are basic skills that all employers expect from employees.

This chapter introduces you to the demands of academic study in higher education. It aims to make you aware of the skills you need and conscious of the level of the skills you currently have and those you will need to be successful in your studies. The chapters that follow will provide you with information to increase your understanding of the foundational skills and the strategies to develop them. The learning you acquire from these chapters has the potential to increase exponentially when you use your new insights and apply your skills to all your academic subjects when studying and doing assignments.
1.2 The demands of academic study

‘Academia’, or the ‘academy’, are collective terms that refer to the community of students who engage in higher education on an advanced level of thinking as they investigate issues and put forward viewpoints in all the various subject fields. The purpose of higher education worldwide is to provide training and produce a skilled workforce to strengthen a nation’s enterprises, services and infrastructure. This requires ‘the development of professionals and knowledge workers with globally equivalent skills, but who are socially responsible and conscious of their role in contributing to the national development effort and social transformation’ (Badat, 2004: p. 7).

Higher education focuses not only on awarding qualifications, but also on developing educated people in the broader sense of enabling graduates to be productive citizens who earn a living, make a contribution to their communities through the knowledge and skills they impart to enterprises, services and infrastructure, and who develop as experts in their field of study.

One question that students should ask themselves is, why am I embarking on further study? The answers might be:

- to obtain a qualification (i.e. a certificate, diploma or degree);
- to expand my horizons; and
- to acquire the key skills that employers expect graduates to have.

The time spent in higher education provides students with countless opportunities to learn about themselves and others; to learn from others; to acquire knowledge about various subjects and areas of study; to develop skills to collect information and process it; to come to new insights; and to use academic writing skills to communicate these insights through assignments and tasks. Such skills increase graduates’ academic success and employability when they enter the world of work.

The responsibility to become an educated person has two sides. On the one hand, the higher-education institution must provide educational opportunities and an environment that is conducive to learning. On the other hand, you, as a student, must engage with your own learning proactively and take personal responsibility for the following issues:

- exploring your needs for, first, personal growth, second, vocational and career development and, third, academic development (in other words, these relate to being consciously aware of the gap between what you know at any given stage of your studies and what you need to know to succeed in your studies and to become employable);
- seeking out and engaging in activities that provide the learning you need to satisfy the above needs;
Academic Literacy

- monitoring the progress in your own studies by reflecting on the results of your academic tasks and the feedback you receive on them;
- reviewing the effectiveness of your studying through the successful completion of modules or courses, and reviewing the extent to which you have satisfied your personal, career and academic needs;
- demonstrating your knowledge and skills by applying what you have learned; and
- planning the next stage of your continuing learning and development as part of your lifelong career management, and keeping up to date with technology and development in your study field.

These responsibilities include more than just using intellectual skills (cognition) to learn subject content. They are about more than just having good study techniques and studying to pass examinations. They entail a willingness to engage with academic study, to investigate, to search for information and meaning, and to have the intellectual perseverance to work through difficult study material. The responsibilities include reflection (meta-cognition), which means looking backward to become aware of what you have done correctly, what you have done incorrectly and what you need to do to improve the next time you are in a similar situation.

Taking responsibility for your own learning requires motivation, commitment and dedication. It implies searching for learning opportunities and experiences both in and out of the classroom. The latter might include student-campus activities (social and cultural), student orientation, student development workshops, community projects, and voluntary and vocational work. All of these provide opportunities to expand your horizon and supplement your curriculum vitae (CV), which will be of great value when you apply for an internship or job.

Higher (or tertiary) education study differs from secondary-school study, and you will have to learn new study patterns. Secondary school study is characterised by daily interaction with teachers; reading specific texts; writing frequent short assignments (often in essay style); and the reproduction of content knowledge in tests, portfolios and examinations. Higher-education study, on the other hand, is characterised by a much wider scope. It involves less frequent contact with lecturers (or only through learner guides and the Internet, in the case of distance education); large classes; less frequent but longer and more in-depth assignments; independent and wide reading (and more than only the prescribed textbooks); referencing skills to acknowledge all sources of information in assignments; individual time management for attending lectures and studying; and critical thinking and academic writing (Monash University, 2007; University of Southampton, 2008). Higher-education study therefore requires students to be independent and self-directed, to be aware of their own personal, career and academic needs, and to take responsibility for their own success.
Chapter 1: Academic Study in Higher Education

1.3 Requirements for academic study

The rapid development in information and communication technology (ICT), as well as the rise of social networking, has altered the way in which people communicate, learn and work. Whereas information used to be entirely locked up in books and journals in libraries, it is now at the fingertips of everyone and accessible through a variety of digital devices. Knowledge – in the form of new information, insights and ideas – is shared freely around the clock. The world moved from the information era, when people gained access to personal computers, to the knowledge era, when the World Wide Web opened up the sharing of knowledge across the globe. We now live in an era of knowledge explosion, in a globalised world where competition is rife in all areas of our lives, work and careers. The knowledge is out there; but now, the challenge is to acquire the skills to navigate it, through the use of ICT; to cope with the abundance of knowledge available; and to find innovative ways to apply knowledge to our life and work, and, ultimately, to survive.

Figure 1.1: The changing focus of learning
These developments profoundly influence the way students learn and lecturers lecture today. When information was limited to books, the method of learning was memorisation of content to gain factual knowledge – in other words, to understand the ‘what’. Typical examination questions were to list aspects, define concepts and explain issues. These skills are referred to as the lower levels of thinking. The knowledge era changed the way students acquire knowledge. Today, students need to apply higher cognitive levels to meet learning demands. An inquiring mind, critical thinking, and asking lots of questions helps students understand the ‘how’ and ‘why’ – in other words to apply knowledge to different situations, make findings and analyse these findings. Figure 1.1 illustrates the changes that have taken place and the current demands of academic study.

Learning at a higher-education level requires that you engage actively with new learning content collected from various information sources, such as textbooks, learner guides, DVDs, the Internet and other digital resources, and from lecturers and fellow students. You need to be curious about issues and have an inquiring mind, so that you can search for answers to problems. You need the skills to navigate through the abundance of information with the use of ICT, to link new information to what you already know (prior knowledge), to analyse information with an open mind, to seek out new experiences, to develop new perspectives and to create new ways of acting through innovative thinking (Brown, 2006: p. 210; Edvinsson et al., 2004: p. 40). This type of active engagement requires a variety of academic skills, which include cognitive (intellectual) skills, meta-cognitive (reflection) skills, and an attitude that values knowledge acquisition through higher-order thinking.

The following sections discuss the knowledge, skills, attitudes and values that students need if they are to be successful in academic studies.

1.3.1 Knowledge of the subject field

The knowledge component includes specific knowledge of the field or discipline you study to acquire a qualification. You need to study at the very least the prescribed books and journal articles thoroughly to acquire theoretical knowledge of the basic concepts of the subject field, and the application of these concepts to the subject field and the world of work. If you study marketing management, for example, you need to know the theories of marketing management, the basic concepts and principles, and how these apply to marketing in the workplace. An employer will expect you to be able to apply your knowledge in the marketing division and be up to date with the newest developments in the field. The marks you achieve for assignments, tests and examinations will reflect the level of your knowledge, and will provide an indication to the employer of your ability to learn.
Chapter 1: Academic Study in Higher Education

1.3.2 Thinking and learning style
Understanding your thinking and learning style can help you study more effectively because you will be aware of the weak and strong points of your style, and what techniques you need to learn to improve. There are many theories about thinking and learning styles, and several descriptions of these styles. What all thinking and learning styles have in common, though, when viewed in a simplified way, is that they entail three main elements:

1. **The way you perceive information.** We perceive and gather information from the world around us through our senses. Some people employ one sense more than the other – be it sight or hearing, or the other senses – touch, smell and taste. This means that some people learn better with visual presentations (e.g. mind maps, pictures, charts, visualisation); some by listening (e.g. listening in class, reading aloud and talking things through with others); some by reading text and writing notes and essays; and some when they perform a skill physically.

   In general, the more senses you use, the more you will perceive and the more information you will gather. You should use your senses in class by listening to the lecturer, taking notes on what is written on the board or on slides, reading textbooks and learner guides, and making summaries.

2. **The way you process information.** Once you have gathered information, you think about it and process it mentally. There are different ways to process information. Some people favour the left side of the brain, which is thought to be the more analytical side. These individuals tend to be structured and logical in their thinking. Examples of left-brain thinkers are scientists, mathematicians and accountants. Other people favour the right side of the brain, which is thought to be the creative side. These individuals are more artistic, and can concentrate on images and pictures. Examples of right-brain thinkers are advertising copywriters, graphic designers and communication specialists.

3. **The way you organise and present information.** Some people organise information with a holistic, or big-picture view; others focus more on a detailed logical analysis. Some prefer to present information verbally; others prefer pictures, and others statistics (Beekman, 2005: p. 8; University of Southampton, 2008).

Read more about thinking and learning styles. Information is available on the Internet, and there are questionnaires that you can complete to establish your style and the thinking techniques you apply. Use this information, first, to build on your strong points (effective techniques) and to improve your weak points (ineffective techniques) so that you use as many senses as possible to perceive information. Second, apply thinking techniques from your whole brain (left and right side) to process information, and, third, organise information and present it in the formats prescribed in the guidelines for your various assignments.
1.3.3 Intellectual (cognitive) skills
The term ‘cognitive skills’ refers to the way you think about issues, how you approach them, how you process the information you perceive and gather, and how you form concepts and ideas to gain understanding and insight.

Solving problems and making decisions necessitate well-developed cognitive skills. Cognitive skills include thinking strategies, such as creative thinking, critical thinking and logical thinking:

- **Creative thinking.** This is mainly a right-brain skill, and involves the generation of new ideas or a novel way of looking at an existing idea. Creativity means being imaginative, inspired, inventive, original and visionary. Creative thinking allows you to look at things and issues from all angles and all perspectives. Creative thinking techniques you can use are brainstorming, mind mapping, visualisation (forming a mental picture) and association (forming links between concepts or facts). Creative thinking is applicable to the following:
  - **Problem-solving** – the brainstorming technique can be used to generate several solutions to a problem and to encourage innovative thought.
  - **Study skills** – the techniques of brainstorming to generate a list of ideas and mind mapping can be used to generate ideas for essays. Visualisation and associative thinking can be used as memory skills.
  - **Creative writing** – thinking techniques, such as imagination, inspiration, originality and inventiveness, are important in creative writing, such as writing advertising copy, slogans and logos.

- **Critical thinking.** This is a left-brain skill that involves analysing techniques to weigh up the negative and positive points, or alternative points, of arguments. This is a higher-order thinking skill needed to break down complicated issues and matters into smaller steps. Critical-thinking skills are applicable to the following:
  - **Problem solving** – a systematic analysis of a problem that is used to understand the causes, the stakeholders, the operation and potential solutions. A technique such as making a list of pros and cons can be used to weigh alternative solutions and to reach decisions about the most appropriate way to solve a problem.
  - **Academic reading and writing** – analysis of words into their root words, prefixes and suffixes helps build one’s vocabulary. Analysing arguments improves understanding of the viewpoints and supporting evidence. Distinguishing between facts and opinion, making judgements about evidence and coming to conclusions are essential in academic reading and writing, and help develop the ability to learn from new insights and experiences.
• **Logical thinking.** This is a left-brain skill that refers to systematic thinking, where you use logical reasoning and think step-by-step as you work through a problem or issue. Logical thinking is applicable to the following:
  - **problem solving** – working systematically through all the stages of the problem-solving process; identifying the problem; analysing the problem; brainstorming solutions; deciding on a solution; drawing up an action plan; implementing the plan; and evaluating the outcomes of the solution;
  - **study skills** – using formulae to do calculations in mathematics, statistics, economics and accounting; and
  - **research** – research or investigation of an issue or problem is part of all academic study programmes. Research is a systematic problem-solving process.

All these thinking skills are essential in higher-education studies. Students are expected to be inquiring, to investigate issues and to do research at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels. All these skills should be used to study more effectively. Each skill has different techniques that can be used to gain an understanding of the learning material and to master it.

**1.3.4 Reflection (meta-cognitive) skills**

Meta-cognition is reflection on experience and is an essential skill in your personal life, academic study and the workplace. You think back on how you have been thinking – for example, how you have approached a task, which thinking skills you used and what process you followed. You have reflected properly when you know what you have done wrong and what you have done correctly, and know what you should do to improve the next time. Reflection should be used to improve your:
  - **problem-solving and decision making** in all contexts;
  - **study skills** – this will happen when you analyse the feedback on tests and assignments. You should identify where and why you have lost marks, and you should add the correct information to the answer sheet as part of preparation for revision before the examination; and
  - **overall performance** – if you reflect on what you do at each stage in your study programme – and learn from it – you will make better progress than if you just write a test or examination, forget about it and move on to the next assessment. You need to take stock of where you are, your successes and failures, and, most importantly, the reasons why you have succeeded or failed.
1.3.5 Study skills

Your success in higher education depends on your ability to study effectively. The results of poor study skills are wasted time, frustration, low or failed grades, wasted money and reduced employability prospects. Study skills include the following:

- a positive attitude to maintain your motivation;
- goal setting, so that you remain focused;
- management of your personal, social and study time;
- study habits to ensure you allow sufficient time to study;
- study methods, so that you approach study material systematically;
- study techniques to work through study material; and
- examination preparation techniques.

There is no magic formula for effective studying: it requires time commitment, and the use of study strategies and techniques. You will need to make the most of your strengths while practising techniques that allow you to improve the weaker areas. How to achieve this is what the rest of the chapters in this book set out to do. If you apply the techniques and tips in this book you can gain a valuable edge in understanding learning material, preparing for tests and, ultimately, learning and performing well. Effective study skills need to be practised if you intend to improve. It is not enough to know about study skills: you have to apply them to every subject. Chapter 8 deals with study skills and provides practical suggestions for improvement.

1.4 Academic task fulfilment

Academic tasks and assignments require active engagement with the learning material. Academic tasks include learning activities and assessment activities:

- Learning activities are those that students perform to master the learning content and achieve the outcomes of the module. Learning activities include exercises in the learner guides and textbooks, such as the ones at the end of each chapter in this book. Doing exercises helps students to assess their knowledge and skills.

- Academic assignments are mostly associated with assessment opportunities during the study term and the final assessment at the end of the term. These may include written assignments, oral presentations, fieldwork and project reports, case studies, and portfolio compilation, as well as tests and examinations with essays and multiple-response questions. Pay attention to the guidelines provided by lecturers for each assignment, follow them and make sure you present the assignment in the prescribed format. Chapter 7 deals extensively with assignment writing.
1.5 Academic reading and writing

Reading and writing in higher education require highly developed cognitive skills. There are various reading and writing styles, different strategies to follow and several techniques that can be applied. Academic reading and writing are based on effective thinking. You read and write with a specific purpose in mind: for example, to scan information; to write an outline for an assignment; to gain in-depth insight before writing an essay; or to read ‘critically’ to write a critical-review report. Reading and writing are like the blades of a pair of scissors: the sharpness of both blades determines the final quality of the academic task or assignment. How effectively you apply strategies and techniques for thinking while reading and writing will determine the academic level you achieve.

Reading for academic purposes is different from reading for leisure. You should identify the reading skills you are currently using and then develop your skills for academic reading so that you are more efficient and can select relevant information more effectively. Using appropriate reading strategies, such as skimming and scanning, is very important in higher education because of the large amount of learning material and the added load of Internet research. You need to navigate the abundance of information efficiently.

Every type of writing – for example, critical-review writing, case-study writing (an analytical approach or problem-oriented method) and report writing – follows a specific process, which includes a reading strategy and planning the writing. These processes will be discussed in detail in the chapters that follow. Academic writing in higher education requires that you write in an academic style. This includes writing technically, and writing critically when completing reports and assignments. It also includes understanding how to correctly reference your work to avoid plagiarism.

CONCLUSION

The key elements to understanding and engaging in academic study are the ability to think, read and write effectively. These elements are interlinked, and the effectiveness of each determines the quality and level of the final product – your academic tasks and assignments. Applying intellectual skills, reflecting on your thinking, reading and writing strategies, techniques and processes, and evaluating what you have achieved are all essential for success. The starting point is the conviction that it is important to think effectively, and to value knowledge and academic performance. Academic study requires an inquiring mind, and a willingness and eagerness to learn.
Engagement requires personal input in terms of time and effort. You can have all the skills in the world, but if you are not committed enough to put in many hours of study, you will not achieve academic success. This is what distinguishes successful from unsuccessful students.

### Exercises

Complete the following questionnaires to help you identify aspects that you need to be more aware of and areas where you can improve if you want to be successful in your studies. After you have done this, you can do a Google search for ‘learning styles’ or ‘career planning’, and complete quizzes and inventories to learn more about your particular style or stage of career life planning.

#### Questions about your career life planning

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>YES</th>
<th>HAVE AN IDEA</th>
<th>NO</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Do you know what opportunities are available in your career field?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you know where you want to be in your career five years from today?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you know where you want to be in your career 10 years from today?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

#### Questions about the demands of academic study

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>YES</th>
<th>SOMETIMES</th>
<th>NO</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Are you an independent, self-motivated learner?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you know which learning style you use?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you know how to read for academic study?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you know how to write in an academic style?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you know your strengths and weaknesses?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

#### Questions about your study skills

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>MOST OF THE TIME</th>
<th>SOMETIMES</th>
<th>ALMOST NEVER</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Do you have a timetable for every week?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you have a year or semester planner?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you study actively, underlining, highlighting, numbering facts and making notes in the margin of the textbook?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you plan for revision?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Chapter 1: Academic Study in Higher Education

References


Developing Vocabulary

Jenni Underhill

The purpose of this chapter is to enable you to develop your vocabulary so that you may use words effectively and appropriately in an academic context, and in the workplace after studying. Having a good vocabulary is an invaluable professional skill.

After studying this chapter, students should be able to:
• use strategies for determining the meaning of unknown words;
• know how to use an English dictionary; and
• give definitions of subject-specific terminology.

2.1 Introduction

Why is it so important to develop a good vocabulary? Using words effectively and appropriately to express yourself affects every aspect of your life. Academically, you are required to use words accurately and correctly, so that you can demonstrate your knowledge acquisition optimally. In the workplace, good, clear and precise communication, with defined word choice, illustrates your professionalism. Thus, developing a good vocabulary contributes to making a success of your career, education, relationships and life in general. It is essential to start building your vocabulary as early as possible. The following are proven strategies for improving vocabulary:

• **Consistent reading.** The best way to improve your vocabulary is to read, read, read. Vocabulary is extended and expanded by reading textbooks, novels and other literature such as newspapers and magazines. The more you read, the faster you will build your vocabulary. You should try to read on as many different subjects and areas of interest as possible and try to vary your reading materials.

• **Using a dictionary.** The key to building your vocabulary through reading is to try, initially, to work out the meaning of the difficult or unfamiliar words that you encounter. To understand their exact meaning, you need to look them up in a dictionary. This is another way to build your vocabulary.

2.2 Using a dictionary

If you are going to use a dictionary, then you need to be aware of the kind of information a dictionary can offer you. Study a page in your dictionary:
Chapter 2: Developing Vocabulary

- The first thing that you will notice is that the dictionary provides you with a definition or description of a word.
- Importantly, the dictionary identifies how a word is to be pronounced by indicating the phonetics (sounds) of a word.
- The dictionary shows which part or parts of speech the word is. For example, it may be a noun or a verb. It will also indicate whether a word is a countable or an uncountable noun. For example, the character ‘[U]’ in an entry indicates an uncountable noun. A list of such indicators can be found at the beginning of a dictionary.
- Dictionaries provide synonyms to help explain the meanings of words.
- The dictionary tells you whether the word is singular or plural. For example, ‘[pl.]’ in an entry indicates that the word can only be used in the plural form.
- Another feature of the dictionary is that it tells you whether a word differs in American English from British (or standard) English.
- The dictionary indicates whether a word is used formally or informally. Thus the context in which the word can be used must be carefully chosen.
- In some instances, a word may have two different meanings or usages. In addition, some words are to be used in a certain context only. When this is the case, the dictionary will indicate it.

**Tip**

When using a dictionary, always consult the pages at the beginning: these provide various keys to explain how the dictionary works. At the back of a dictionary, you will find appendices that provide you with extra grammatical and pronunciation information. In dictionaries that are aimed at students, you will also find pages in the middle that provide you with study notes on grammar.

2.3 Context clues

When you encounter new words, your first instinct may be to reach for the dictionary. However, there are other ways to arrive at the meaning of a word. Because words do not stand alone, much of the vocabulary you acquire will not come from reading a dictionary. Often, you will work out what words mean by how they appear and function in the text you are reading. Most texts include so-called context clues, which help readers to understand the meanings of words they may not know. The context clue mostly forms part of the sentence or paragraph where the word is found. When people write, they often consciously include context clues for difficult or challenging words.
Academic Literacy

The context clue is usually found in the sentence or paragraph in which the word occurs. In some instances, the context clue may be visual: for example, a picture may be included to help the reader to understand the text. It is helpful to be mindful of context clues when you are working with an assignment question or an exam question. If you can adhere to context clues, then your understanding of what is being asked of you may be enhanced.

The following are six types of context clues used by authors to help the reader understand the meanings of words:

1. **Definition context clue** – the writer will supply a definition to help the reader understand the meaning of a word. In the following example, ‘homogeneous’ is defined as meaning ‘people with the same characteristics’: *The company looked into its homogeneous group of consumers and realised their uniform characteristics and needs.*

2. **Synonym context clue** – the writer includes a synonym to help the reader understand the meaning of a word. A synonym is a word that means the same as, or nearly the same as another word. In the following example, the synonym ‘overjoyed’ helps the reader understand the meaning of ‘exalted’: *The CFO was exalted and overjoyed to identify an upward increase in sales.*

3. **Antonym context clue** – the author includes an antonym to help the reader understand the meaning of a word. An antonym is a word that means the opposite of another word. In the following example, the antonym ‘willing’ helps the reader understand the meaning of ‘tentative’: *Tim’s decision to take on the position of marketing manager was tentative. He was afraid that he had too little experience to cope. Sipho however, was more than willing to take the job. He understood that he would gain experience as he proceeded in the position.*

4. **Description context clue** – the writer includes one or more descriptions (explanations) to help the reader understand the meaning of a word. In the following example, the manager is described as unyielding. The other words in the sentence help the reader understand what unyielding means. *Jeff McDonald, our company’s manager, is unyielding in his decision-making and actions. He is rather inflexible and unapproachable. His attitude has made employees feel uncomfortable as processes feel undemocratic and largely unfair.*

5. **Summary context clue** – the writer provides statements that help the reader understand the meaning of a word. In the following example, statements about being rude, showing no respect, having poor manners and being impolite help the reader understand the meaning of ‘impertinent’: *Andrea was an impertinent employee. She talked rudely during staff meetings. She showed no respect for others. As a result, her manners were considered very poor by other staff members. Even her closest colleagues thought that Andrea was impolite.*
6. **Visual context clue** – the writer may include a picture, illustration, chart, graph or other type of visual aid to help the reader understand the meaning of a word. For example, a picture and its caption will help the reader understand a word.

**Tip**

*Using the context clues in texts can help you learn the meaning of many new words without having to continuously consult the dictionary. This is helpful when you are trying to get an overview of a text (the gist/essential meaning). Be aware of them as you read or work with texts.*

### 2.4 Building a vocabulary

Many words that we read in an academic context are composed of different parts. Being able to recognise the various parts of unfamiliar words can help you to work out their meaning. The three main parts are as follows:

- **Root word** – a word that has nothing added at the beginning or the end. It stands on its own as a word, and it has a meaning. An example of a root word is ‘photo’. This can change to photograph, photon or photosynthesis.
- **Prefix** – a particle (that is, a group of letters) at the beginning of a word that changes the meaning of the root word. For example, when the prefix ‘dis-’ is added to the word ‘appear’, it makes the word opposite in meaning, (‘disappear’).
- **Suffix** – a group of letters that are added to the end of a word that change its function. For example, when the suffix ‘-al’ is added to the noun ‘nation’, it becomes an adjective (‘national’). Other examples: quick + ly = quickly; sad + ness = sadness.

#### 2.4.1 Root words

As the term ‘root word’ suggests, this is a word that has nothing added and which forms the basis for other words. New words can be made from root words by adding beginnings (prefixes) and endings (suffixes). For example, ‘clear’ is a root word. By adding prefixes and suffixes, you can make these new words: ‘unclear’, ‘clearly’, ‘cleared’. All of these words have developed from their root word. They share parts of the same spelling and they are linked in terms of meaning. Collectively, they are known as a word family, which means they are like a family because they share parts of the same spelling and have interconnected meanings.

Here are some other examples of word families:

- **Use**: useless, usable, used, using, user, misuse
- **Employ**: employment, unemployment, employer, employee, employing
- **Manage**: manager, managing, manages, manageable, unmanageable
Root words are important to recognise because if you identify the root of a word when you are reading, it can help you to work out the meaning of the word.

### 2.4.2 Prefixes

Many of the prefixes used in English have Greek or Latin origins. It is helpful to know what the prefixes mean and how they are spelt. Often, if you know what the prefix means, then you can work out the meaning of the word. Look at the list of prefixes in Table 2.1, and focus on those with which you are not familiar. Building a vocabulary takes time and discipline. Over time, you might consider creating a prefix table of your own. As you find new examples in your reading, you can record them in your list. Please note that this list contains only some examples of prefixes. You will encounter others in your reading.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PREFIX</th>
<th>MEANING</th>
<th>EXAMPLES</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ante-</td>
<td>before, in front of</td>
<td>antechamber, antenatal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>anti-</td>
<td>against</td>
<td>anticlockwise, anticoagulant, antifreeze</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>co-</td>
<td>with, together</td>
<td>co-supervisor, co-star</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>de-</td>
<td>remove, take away</td>
<td>deforest, deform, defrost, defunct, degenerate, degrade, dehydrate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>dis-</td>
<td>away from, not</td>
<td>distress, disuse, distrust, distemper</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ex-</td>
<td>out of, away from</td>
<td>excommunicate, ex-directory</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>hyper-</td>
<td>very, extremely</td>
<td>hypermarket, hyperactive, hyperventilate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>hypo-</td>
<td>under, less</td>
<td>hypothermia, hypocritical</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>in-</td>
<td>not, lacking, the opposite of</td>
<td>indirect, invalid, invariable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mal-</td>
<td>wrong/bad</td>
<td>malfunction, malformed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>micro-</td>
<td>very small</td>
<td>microcomputer, microphone, microscope</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mis-</td>
<td>not, wrong, badly</td>
<td>misdirect, misconception, misapply, miscalculate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mono-</td>
<td>one</td>
<td>monograph, monochrome, monorail</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>non-</td>
<td>not, none</td>
<td>nonaligned, noncommittal, nonconformist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>post-</td>
<td>after</td>
<td>postgraduate, post-industrial, postmodern</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pre-</td>
<td>before</td>
<td>prearrange, preamble, precaution, precede</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pro-</td>
<td>on behalf of, for</td>
<td>proactive, procure, profile, profound</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>re-</td>
<td>again</td>
<td>retract, retrain, retreat, retread</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>semi-</td>
<td>half</td>
<td>semi-automatic, semi-professional, semi-skilled</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sub-</td>
<td>under, beneath</td>
<td>subnormal, subsection, submission</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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2.4.3 Suffixes

A suffix is a word ending. It is a group of letters you can add to the end of a word. Including suffixes can change or add to their meaning but, most importantly, they show how a word will be used in a sentence and which part of speech (e.g. noun, verb, adjective) it is. For example, say you want to use the root word ‘think’ in the following sentence: *I was (think) about the future of technology*. You need to add the suffix ‘-ing’, so that the word ‘think’ makes sense grammatically: *I was thinking about the future of technology*.

There are various suffixes that are commonly used. The most frequently used ones are ‘-ed’ and ‘-ing’. Table 2.2 lists some other suffixes and examples of how they are used.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SUFFIX</th>
<th>EXAMPLE</th>
<th>SUFFIX</th>
<th>EXAMPLE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>-ed</td>
<td>walk + ed = walked</td>
<td>-ness</td>
<td>happy + ness = happiness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-ing</td>
<td>say + ing = saying</td>
<td>-al</td>
<td>accident + al = accidental</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-er</td>
<td>small + er = smaller</td>
<td>-ary</td>
<td>imagine + ary = imaginary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-tion</td>
<td>educate + tion = education</td>
<td>-able</td>
<td>accept + able = acceptable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-tion</td>
<td>educate + tion = education</td>
<td>-ly</td>
<td>love + ly = lovely</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-sion</td>
<td>revise + sion = revision</td>
<td>-ment</td>
<td>fulfil + ment = fulfilment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-fully</td>
<td>care + fully = carefully</td>
<td>-ful</td>
<td>mind + ful = mindful</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-est</td>
<td>tall + est = tallest</td>
<td>-y</td>
<td>ease + y = easy</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Tip**

*Note that adding a suffix to some root words changes the spelling of the new word.*

2.4.4 Compound words

English words may change over time and with the effect of various influences. A common way in which words have changed is that certain words that were once written as two words – ‘draw bridge’ is an example – later become joined by a hyphen for a while – ‘draw-bridge’ – and then become formed as one word – ‘drawbridge’. ‘Drawbridge’ is an example of a compound word. A compound word is made up of two words joined together in various ways to make a new word. Working with compound words helps increase your vocabulary and
improves spelling. Compound words are used frequently in the English language and we usually don’t think much about them until we have to write them down. Then we often have to pause and consider how they are spelled. In English, words, particularly adjectives and nouns, are combined into compound structures in various ways.

There are three forms of compound words:
• The closed form (words are blended together): afternoon, football
backup, airport, chalkboard, classmate, daydream, fingernail.
• The hyphenated form: word-of-mouth, nitty-gritty, know-it-all, mother-in-law, well-being, three-dimensional.
• The open form: post office, real estate, course work, cash flow, energy bar, memory stick, new world.

If you are in doubt of how to spell a compound word, you should check a dictionary. You need to use a hyphen if the word will not make sense without one. Often, whether to use a hyphen or not is simply editorial preference. Occasionally, using a hyphen can also help avoid ambiguity. A hyphen is used in a prefix when the unhyphenated word would have a different meaning. For example:
• re-creation;
• re-formation; and
• re-sign.

For example, internet-related compounds are still so new that whether to use a hyphen or not is not certain. Over time, it is likely that their spelling will become more consistent. The following are some examples of Internet terms currently most widely used in professionally edited, published writing:
• E-mail (with a capital ‘E’ when used as a noun);
• e-mail (with a lower-case ‘e’ when used as a verb);
• online;
• website;
• web page;
• e-book;
• e-tail;
• webcam; and
• dot-com;

Table 2.3 contains some examples of common compound words.
Table 2.3: Examples of commonly used compounds

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>earthquake</th>
<th>riverbank</th>
<th>superego</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>spearmint</td>
<td>pacemaker</td>
<td>waterline</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>schoolhouse</td>
<td>commonplace</td>
<td>blueprint</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>horseback</td>
<td>eyesight</td>
<td>foreclosure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>limestone</td>
<td>background</td>
<td>newsbreak</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>touchdown</td>
<td>underachieve</td>
<td>teammate</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Include compound words in your vocabulary building and record these words as you come across them. There will be many in your disciplines that you will need to recall.

2.4.5. Homophones

Homophones are words (or phrases or letters) that, although they are pronounced the same, differ in meaning, such as ‘to’, ‘too’ and ‘two’. It is particularly important to be able to recognise homophones because computer spell/grammar checkers cannot always pick them up as errors if they are used incorrectly.

Here are some common examples:

- there and their;
- whether and weather;
- aisle and isle;
- cell and sell;
- buy and by;
- cereal and serial;
- course and coarse;
- hair and hare;
- complement and compliment;
- him and hymn;
- whole and hole;
- steal and steel; and
- profit and prophet.

Homophones need to be checked using a dictionary and by reading the context of the sentences that they appear in (see Section 2.5, which explains the importance of understanding words in context). Part of building your vocabulary is knowing where your word strengths and weaknesses are. If homophones confuse you, try to keep a record of their meanings on hand for quick reference.
2.5 Knowing a word

What does it mean to ‘know’ a word? You can have passive or active knowledge of a word. Passive knowledge will enable you to understand the word, but not use it correctly. To use a word with confidence, you need to have active knowledge of a word. This means you need to have all the following information about a word:

- **Meaning:** this is the definition of the word within the correct or appropriate context. Using words can be a complicated exercise. You should keep in mind that words have denotations, which are basically their dictionary definitions. However, they also have connotations. These are the emotional associations that words carry. Remember that there can be many words to describe one thing. For example, consider the phrase, ‘a young person’. The following words all refer to a young person: ‘youngster’, ‘child’, ‘kid’, ‘little one’, ‘small fry’, ‘brat’, ‘urchin’, ‘juvenile’, ‘minor’. Some have favourable connotations, whereas others have negative connotations, and others have neutral connotations. Some are formal and some are informal, and can only be used in casual or colloquial contexts. In academic writing, it is advisable to keep your word choice as neutral, formal and unemotional as possible.

- **Use:** when you really know a word, you are able to use it appropriately and effectively. You are able to use words in relation to other words. In this way, you automatically put words together that belong together. This is known as collocation. Collocation involves putting the right adjectives with the right nouns or the right adverbs with the appropriate verbs. When using a word appropriately, you also need to know if the word fits its context. For example, you would not use the word ‘kid’ in a business report to describe a young employee of a company. This would be too informal and colloquial.

![Figure 2.1: Knowing a word](image-url)
• **Form:** knowing a word means knowing what part of speech it is – whether it is a noun, verb, adjective, adverb or preposition. You should also be able to recognise the root, suffix and/or prefix of a word, as well as its spelling and pronunciation.

• **Word grammar:** when you know a word, you know how to use it in a sentence so that it makes sense. For instance, when using nouns, you need to know whether they are countable or uncountable. When you use adverbs or adjectives, you need to know where they fit in a sentence.

**Note:** An affix is a word element (prefix or suffix) that can be attached to a base or root to form a new word or a new form of a word.

### 2.6 Learning academic or subject-specific vocabulary

There are various types of dictionaries that may be used to help you develop your vocabulary. Dictionaries may be designed to be subject-specific. These are special-purpose dictionaries, such as those used for business studies or medical purposes, for example.

The treatment of the word differs depending on the type of dictionary in which it appears. This is because dictionaries have different target-user groups. For example, think about the word ‘market’. An economist or financial consultant will need a particular definition of ‘market’, which is different from the definition required by someone who is trying to describe, for example, a Sunday-morning food market. The subject-specific words that you learn will have a specific meaning in the context of your academic field. People who do not know your area of study may not understand you when you use these words because they are subject-specific. In this way, it is almost as if you are using a new or another language. This is why you need to know what new words mean in the language of the subject you are studying.

**Table 2.4: Comparing definitions using different types of dictionaries**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SUBJECT-SPECIFIC DICTIONARY</th>
<th>EVERYDAY DICTIONARY</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No information on pronunciation</td>
<td>Provides a phonetic transcription of the pronunciation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No example sentences</td>
<td>Example sentences demonstrate usage of the word in context.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Only the technical or scientific sense (meaning) of the word is treated.</td>
<td>All potential meanings of the word are treated (general and technical).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No grammatical information is given.</td>
<td>Grammatical information is provided - that is, the word class (noun); prepositions (in relation to somebody or something); countable: plural vs singular.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The definition of the technical sense is longer and more comprehensive than the technical definition given in the general dictionary.

The definition of the technical term is of a more general nature, is shorter and is written in plain language.

Cross-references to other related words.

Therefore, finding the correct definition of a word depends on where and how you want to use it. Special-purpose dictionaries include word lists that are related and useful for specific fields of study. General dictionaries are aimed at students using everyday English as part of their studies and academic writing but they are not for specific subjects. The word list in general English dictionaries includes general words and a few technical terms. The explanations of technical terms in general English dictionaries are less detailed and specialised.

2.7 Build your vocabulary

Choose words or terms from your lecture notes and/or textbooks that seem to you to be both difficult to understand and particularly important in a subject. Follow the steps below to create a table divided into sections. This will enable you to remember, as well as use, the word.

1. Write the word in the first column.
2. In the second column, write out a definition of the word as you understand it, before looking it up. The definition is therefore in your own words.
3. Now look up the word in a general English dictionary. This will give you the ‘everyday’ usage of the word.
4. In the fourth column refer to a subject-specific dictionary or a glossary of terms. You will note whether there is a difference between the general dictionary definition and the subject-specific definition.
5. In the last column, write the word/term in a sentence or paragraph of your own that includes the word and makes its meaning clear.
6. When you have finished, work with a partner and compare the words you have chosen. Where you have chosen the same words, compare your definitions. Decide who has the clearest definition and rewrite the definitions where necessary.
7. Where the terms you have chosen are different, use each other’s definitions to write sentences using the terms that show how the terms are used.
8. Discuss the sentences you have written, and whether they are good examples of the contexts in which the terms are used.
Chapter 2: Developing Vocabulary

Remember that if you follow this type of vocabulary-building exercise you will struggle less to answer assignment questions properly. Answering an assignment well depends on understanding the words used in that assignment. An assignment question will consist of content words and other types of words. Content words are subject-specific words. They tell you what the topic areas of your assignment are, and take you halfway towards reducing your material and choosing your answer. Content words help you to focus your research and reading on a specific subject area. You need to spend time understanding what content words mean before you start to answer the question (see Chapter 7 Assignment Writing).

CONCLUSION

Developing a wide vocabulary allows you to express yourself clearly and well in your studies. With a large vocabulary, you can read more broadly, understand more of what you read and understand more of what people say. You can formulate academic arguments better and express your acquired knowledge in detail by using effective words to express distinctions in your thinking. Remember that mastering the vocabularies of your subjects is an integral part of understanding your chosen fields of study.

✓ Tip

- If English is not your first language, you might want to work with someone who speaks the same first language, and in that language translate and discuss the meaning of the word before writing your explanation in English.

- Make it personal – if you associate words with things that have individual meaning for you, you are less likely to forget the words. You may like to think of new words in categories and in relation to particular associations. You may like to make up rhymes or other kinds of wordplay to help you enhance your word retention. There are various ways to add personal relevance to a word – you just need to be creative.

- Word repetition – this is a useful tool for building vocabulary. If you really want to build your vocabulary, you should repeat new words several times a day, every day, to commit them to memory. It is also good to write words down or keep a vocabulary book, workbook, file or glossary table (as below). Read the words to yourself as often as you can. Each time you read a word, analyse its meaning and use it in a sentence. Focusing on the meaning will help you use the word properly. This is a very effective strategy for learning and remembering academic and subject-specific words.
Exercise

Fill in this template of your own personal word glossary over time. This is an excellent way to record new words in any subject or discipline, to remember them and to use them correctly, especially when writing assignments and answering exam questions.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1. Word</th>
<th>2. Your own explanation (before looking up the word in the dictionary)</th>
<th>3. General dictionary definition</th>
<th>4. Subject-specific definition</th>
<th>5. Your own sentence (you must include the word)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

References


Although you have been reading since you started school (or even earlier, in some cases), you need to arm yourself with the most effective ways of conducting this process, so that you can make the most of your studies in higher education. The purpose of this chapter is not only to help you improve on the reading techniques that you already employ, but also to introduce some new ones to you.

After studying this chapter, students should be able to:
• draw on background knowledge to understand texts;
• understand how academic texts are structured;
• identify the purpose of reading tasks;
• use appropriate reading strategies, such as skimming and scanning; and
• read diagrams and tables.

3.1 Introduction

To be truly successful as a higher-education student, you have to be proficient in the macro communication skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing. Of these skills, it is probably the last two that will occupy most of your time in higher education. Reading and writing are critical activities for a number of reasons. Think about all the knowledge you have gained over the years, and consider how you came by it. You probably would not know half as much as you do about the world around you if you were unable to read. We can therefore say that:
• reading is information – the more you read, the more informed you become;
• reading is power – the more informed you are, the less likely you are to make wrong decisions about the things that affect your life;
• reading is food for the mind and the imagination; and
• reading is necessary for academic success.

This chapter addresses the macro skill of reading for study purposes. The term ‘reading for study purposes’ is used deliberately here because you read for different purposes, and each purpose determines how you approach the reading task at hand. This means that the strategies you need to employ differ from one reading task to the next. Before discussing these strategies, however, it is necessary to look at the general structure of academic texts.
3.2 Understanding the structure of academic texts

To be able to apply appropriate reading strategies to each task, you need to have some understanding of how academic texts are structured. This will help you to make sense of the content of different types of texts more quickly. There are basically three types of texts that you will find yourself reading in higher education:

- academic texts;
- textbooks; and
- journal articles.

3.2.1 Academic texts and textbooks

The first point to make about academic texts or textbooks is that they are formal in structure and style. If you have an awareness of their structure, it will be easier to understand Section 3.3 of this chapter, which describes effective reading strategies when dealing with such texts.

An academic text, or a chapter in a textbook, is likely to have an introduction, which presents what is called the ‘thesis point’, or the main argument. Everything else in the text revolves around this thesis point. So, by identifying it at the beginning of the reading task, you prepare yourself to look for the subsidiary arguments or supporting details that the writer advances to support the main thesis.

As well as understanding the concept of a thesis point, you need to understand what is meant by a ‘topic sentence’. This is the sentence that carries the main idea in each paragraph. By identifying the topic sentences in the text, you get a sense of how the writer has developed the main argument or thesis point. In many academic texts, the topic sentence is the first sentence in the paragraph; all the other sentences are linked to it, as they expand, explain, exemplify or provide other evidence to support it. However, the topic sentence may also occur at the end of the paragraph or at some other point. It is also possible, especially with short paragraphs, that there is no topic sentence as such, in which case you have to read these paragraphs together to get a sense of the main point that is being made.

Being aware of topic sentences has a number of benefits, one of which is to expedite the process of summarising a text. Once you have established that a particular text has paragraphs that begin with a topic sentence, you can summarise it very quickly by focusing on these topic sentences. However, you have to be careful that you do not then go on to use them in an assignment without first putting them in your own words and citing the source of the information thus summarised (refer to Chapter 7 for more information on how to correctly reference your writing).
Chapter 3: Reading for Study Purposes

3.2.2 Journal articles

As is the case with academic texts and textbooks, you will find it much easier to read, understand and extract relevant information from journal articles (also referred to as papers) if you understand the typical structure in which they are presented. If an article is based on empirical research, for example, it is likely to follow the following format:

- **Abstract** – this is a brief summary that is found at the top of the first page, immediately below the title. It gives information on what the article is about, what the research is about, what the researcher did, how the research was done and what the findings were, as well as the significance of those findings. It therefore makes sense to read the abstract first, before you go on to read the whole article. The abstract provides an easy way of skimming through the article and helps you decide whether the article will be relevant to your work in the first place.

- **Introduction** – the introduction is typically divided into three general sections: a brief reference to other research that has been done in the area; some explanation of why the researcher felt there was a need to conduct this research; and an outline of what the researcher hopes to achieve by carrying out the research. Reading the introduction gives you the information you need to form an initial idea of what is contained in the rest of the article.

- **Method** – the method section describes the methods that the researcher used in conducting the research, including the research design (e.g. whether quantitative or qualitative data was collected, how it was analysed and the target population).

- **Results** – as the term suggests, this is where the researcher describes the results of the research.

- **Discussion** – in this section, the writer interprets the results of the research. Reading the discussion helps you understand the significance of the results. In some articles, the results and discussion are combined into one section.

- **Conclusion** – here, the researcher discusses the meaning and implication of the research results and might go on to make recommendations regarding the need for either changes to present practice or for further research in the area. Reading this section makes you aware of the key issues that have emerged from the research results.

3.3 Reading purposes and strategies

Now let us consider some of the reasons why we read and the relevant strategies applicable to each one. For the most part, we read for the following reasons:

- for relaxation;
- to find specific information;

...
• to have an overview of a text;
• for critical analysis of a text, and
• for study purposes.

To derive the greatest benefit from reading, you need to apply appropriate reading strategies. These are described in the sections that follow.

3.3.1 Reading for relaxation
Most people read novels, newspapers, entertainment magazines and the like for relaxation. With such reading, it does not matter if, from time to time, you let your mind wander, or you cannot remember everything you have read. In fact, some people read to help themselves fall asleep.

3.3.2 Reading for specific information
When reading to find specific information, it is important to keep this purpose in mind and not allow yourself to be distracted. The way to do this is to scan the text by running your eyes down the page until you locate the information that you are looking for. Think about what you do when you are looking for a number in a telephone directory. Having achieved your purpose, you should move on to the next task on your schedule.

3.3.3 Reading for overview
Reading to have an overview of a text requires different strategies, because your main purpose here is to have a general idea of what is contained in that text, be it a whole book, a chapter or an article. The appropriate strategy to apply is to skim or browse through the text. Let us suppose you want to decide whether a particular book is worth checking out of the library. Looking at the following parts will give you a clear idea of what is contained in it:

• **Title** (and the subtitle, if one is included) – to establish how relevant the text is for your purpose.

• **Author** – for information on how knowledgeable he/she might be about the subject (you might find, for example, that you recognise the name from a lecture).

• **Date of publication and edition** – these help you decide whether or not the book is up to date. If there is a reference to the edition, make sure that it is the latest one, as authors update the content with each new edition.

• **Table of contents** – for an overall view of the material contained in the book. The chapter headings will give you a good indication of the book’s coverage of the information that you are looking for.

• **Index** (at the end of the book) – this section lists alphabetically all the important information in the book for ease of reference. Page references give a good
indication of the extent to which each topic is covered. For example, if there is one page given in the index, this may well mean that there is only a brief reference to that topic. However, if a page range is given, say 129–169, then you know there is a sizeable section of the book devoted to the topic.

Go through the skimming process quickly and then go on to your next task.

### 3.3.4 Reading for critical analysis of a text

There are arguably two main reasons why we read texts critically. One is to appreciate and learn from the writing styles adopted by different writers - that is, the syntactic or semantic choices they make to convey their thoughts on a topic to best effect. The more successfully you can analyse different writing styles in your disciplines, the more likely you are to become not only a skilled writer yourself but also a skilled reader who is able to appreciate fully how words can be made to work together in texts to convey intended meanings.

The other is to gain an understanding of the writer’s purposes in producing that text – whether it is simply to inform, to persuade, to put forward a point of view, and so on. Different texts provide you with opportunities to learn facts about the writer’s topic of discussion, to describe what he or she says, or to reflect upon and interpret the underlying intent of the text. How you read depends on the type of text and your purpose for reading it. Let us say, for example, that you are a history student. You might read about a particular historical event because you want to:

- learn facts about who was involved in the situation and what happened;
- contextualise the event described by the writer based on your knowledge of what else was happening at the time; or
- gain insights into the possible motives behind the manner in which the writer chooses to present the event and to proceed to form your own opinion about possible biases in that narrative.

Therefore, when you set out to read a text critically, you are interested not only in what a writer is saying but also in what the underlying intention is. Only when you have established the argument presented by the writer can you evaluate it and arrive at a position of your own. Critical reading is therefore a vital step in the process of inducting you into the discourses of your discipline.

### 3.3.5 Reading for study purposes

Paulo Freire, a renowned Brazilian educator, once said: ‘Reading the world precedes reading the word.’ By this, Freire meant that, from the moment that we are born, we begin to make sense of the world around us by associating the unknown with the known. This is why a baby might call all males ‘Daddy’ or all animals ‘doggie’. If babies were not able to make these associations, they would
be hopelessly confused by any new object or person that they came across. In the same way, everything that you read would be totally incomprehensible if you were not able to form associations between it and what you already know about a particular topic and the world in general. Therefore, when you are reading for study purposes, it is critical to read systematically, so that you are able to integrate the new knowledge you acquire with what you already know.

Being systematic in the way in which you read means being able to apply some kind of method to the task. One such method is referred to as ‘SQ3R’, which stands for survey, question, read, recite and review. At first, this may seem laborious and time-consuming but, with time, you might find that you are reading with increased understanding, and there is less need for you to reread texts. It is best to apply the SQ3R method to small chunks of text, otherwise some of its benefits are lost.

Surveying a text
Surveying is just another word for skimming. When you prepare for study reading of a chapter in a book, for example, you would begin by looking at:

- the chapter heading;
- subheadings, if any;
- illustrations, or any other graphics (be sure to read the captions, if any are provided);
- the first paragraph;
- the first sentence in succeeding paragraphs;
- the last paragraph; and
- the discussion questions, if any.

Questioning a text
The process of surveying provides you with material for your questions. Turn the chapter heading and subheadings into questions, and then create other questions relating to the illustrations or graphics, or what the writer says in the introduction and conclusion. Going through this questioning process (the ‘Q’ in SQ3R) ensures that, when you start reading, you have a clear purpose for doing so: you want to find the answers to your questions.

The first ‘R’: Read
Read the text interactively. This means holding a ‘conversation’ with the text by focusing on what you are reading and on trying to make sense of it by relating it to what you have read before, and questioning what you do not understand. As you go along, annotate the text in any or all of the following ways (or use any other systematic way of annotation that you are familiar with):
• Double underline the author’s point(s) and jot ‘MP’ (main point) in the margin, or use a highlighter pen, dedicating a specific colour to main points.

• Circle definitions/meanings.

• Use an asterisk symbol (*) to mark major pieces of evidence, like statistics, narratives or arguments. Note in the margin the kind of evidence and its purpose – for instance, ‘example that illustrates claim’.

• Put question marks next to points that are unclear and note whether you need more information, whether the author has been unclear, or whether the passage just sounds unreasonable or out of place.

• Put exclamation points next to passages that you react to strongly in agreement or disagreement, or because they particularly interest you.

• Use keywords or symbols in the margin to signal where important information is found.

• Underline important terms.

• Use numbers in the margin to list related points.

• Note any patterns within the text: for example, repetitions, contradictions, similarities.

Engaging with the text in this manner ensures that you are focused on the reading task and are not easily distracted. At the end of the reading task, you are also more likely to remember what you have read than you would be otherwise.

Although Figure 3.1 is a very brief example of how one can annotate a text, it illustrates some of its uses:

• identifying the topic sentence in each paragraph;

• drawing attention to words or phrases that need explaining in the context of the text; for example, the word ‘have’ has been highlighted in Figure 3.1 because it might not make sense at first, until you realise that it is referring backwards to the end of the previous paragraph. This is an example of syntactic ellipsis. Here, the full sentence would read ‘Yet for those who have experienced the practice, it can be profound.’ In the text, this phrase is omitted to avoid repetition; and

• drawing attention to words that the reader is probably unfamiliar with, such as ‘defer’; the ordinary meaning of this word clearly does not make sense in this context.

Therefore, annotating a text is much more than just making notes. If you engage with a text in this manner, it is unlikely that you will forget what you have read. Of course, most books do not have enough space on the right-hand side of the page for you to make notes.
Figure 3.1 shows some techniques for annotating a text:

**Figure 3.1:** Example of annotation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Notes/comments</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.  &quot;Formal management training best for managers with work experience ‘art and craft as well as some science’...’ Meaning?&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.  &quot;Such training extremely useful for experienced managers...’ With lecturers? How?&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.  &quot;Experience used as criterion for selection:...’ With lecturers? How?&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.  &quot;Care taken not make participants abandon jobs in order to go on training:...’ With lecturers? How?&quot;</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Although managers cannot be created in a classroom, practising managers can profoundly improve their capabilities there. Management is a practice, comprising a great deal of art and craft as well as some science. That is why managers cannot be created in a classroom, the way, for example, physicians or accountants are, at least initially. Management education means little to those who have not experienced the practice.

Yet for those who have, it can be profound. That is why we accept only practising managers in our classrooms, indeed only ones sent and sponsored by their companies. As a consequence, we have no ‘students’ in our programs; we have participants – partners in the learning process. In fact, we ask the companies to send four or five participants to each class, so that they can work together as a team in some of the workshops in the classrooms as well as for impact of the learning back on the job. Experience provides a wonderful basis for selecting these participants. Certainly intelligence is important, and test scores measure that. But these do not indicate managerial potential, not as does performance in the job of managing, assessed by companies that are about to invest a considerable sum of money in these people. So we defer largely to the companies for selection and end up with consistently strong classes.

Companies select people with strong intellectual abilities as well as proven records of getting things done. The IMPM is seen as a way to sharpen these capabilities.

Of course, it makes little sense to select people steeped in practice and then disconnect them from that practice in order to educate them. The classroom is a wonderful place to make use of ongoing experience. So participants stay on their jobs in this program and to the classroom for periods of time long enough to sustain learning and short enough to sustain managing – about two weeks, in our experience. The IMPM runs with five on-site modules of approximately 2 weeks each, spread over 16 months, in addition to other activities back on the job.
You can, however, use the margins on all four sides of the page, as well as the spaces between paragraphs, to ask questions, write comments or note points that you need to follow up through further reading, and so on (provided that the text belongs to you and not to the library or another person!).

**The second ‘R’: Recite**

The second ‘R’ should happen at various points during your interactive reading of the text. When you recite, you check your understanding of the content of the text as you go along, ideally paragraph by paragraph. If the text is made up of a mixture of long and short paragraphs, you can combine the shorter ones before reciting. You recite what you have read by repeating it to yourself silently, focusing only on the main point that you identified as you annotated the text. At this stage you should write your notes – without referring back to the text. Making notes in this way ensures that you concentrate on what you are reading because you know that you will soon have to write it down without looking at the text. It also means that your notes are in your own words.

In some sources, you will find reference to ‘SQ4R’, where this note-making part constitutes another ‘R’ (as in ‘wRite’). Whatever this step is called, it is important, in that it ensures that you do not have to do any intensive rereading of the original text afterwards.

**The third ‘R’: Review**

When you review, you check the accuracy of your notes against the text and correct any inaccuracies.

As mentioned, initially the SQ3R method may appear laborious and consume valuable time. However, you are likely to realise its benefits when you find that your reading is much more productive. When you are forced to read and understand texts, and you make notes in your own words, you avoid one form of plagiarism, which is copying parts of a text word for word. You are also likely to find that, with practice and time, your reading speed improves.

**ECT study method**

To gain maximum benefit from the SQ3R method, which may feel somewhat mechanical, you can apply it in conjunction with other approaches that go beyond the text that you are working with at a particular time. One such approach, which emphasises the value of experimentation and testing, is the three-stage ECT study method. The letters ‘ECT’ stand for exploration, consolidation and testing.
Academic Literacy

The exploration stage relates to the process of consciously activating any prior knowledge you might have about a topic that you are about to start studying. Reading around the topic in preparation for a lecture, discussing aspects of the topic with fellow students whenever an opportunity presents itself, or watching television programmes related to the topic can all be considered part of the exploration stage. When you are in exploration mode, nothing that is relevant, however remotely, escapes your attention. The exploration stage is concluded when you finally attend that lecture that you have been preparing for, by which time you should have a fairly good idea of what it is you know about the topic, as well as what gaps need to be filled as you engage with the lecture content.

The second stage, consolidation, follows after the lecture. This is when you reflect on all the elements that made up the exploration stage – what you knew about the topic from prior experience; what you gathered from your pre-reading in preparation for the lecture; and the gap-fillers, as well as the additional knowledge provided by the lecture. When you pull all these together, ideally as you edit and rewrite your notes, as soon after the lecture as possible, a ‘solid’ mental picture of the topic should emerge. When this happens, you can say that you have learnt the part of the subject matter covered in the lecture.

However, telling yourself that you have learnt something is not enough: you have to put this perception to the test, which is the final stage of ECT. The third stage, testing, involves you playing the role of your own examiner as you set yourself questions to answer based on your knowledge of the kinds of questions that lecturers in the subject normally ask. The more successfully you can answer these self-evaluation questions, the more confident you will become about your ability to cope with the subject.

By using ECT in conjunction with a study method such as SQ3R, which focuses mainly on how to read texts effectively, you can become an effective, self-directed learner, truly immersing yourself in your studies.

### 3.4 Reading diagrams and tables

Texts often include diagrams and tables of various types, in which information is presented in a visual format. The various types of diagrammatic representations that you will come across as you read academic texts include:

- graphs;
- charts;
- tables;
- diagrams; and
- illustrations and photos.
The purpose of presenting information visually is to make it brief and easier to digest than had it been written down. In your studies, you will probably be expected either to create visual images or to interpret those you find in the academic texts you read. Because this is a chapter on reading strategies, only information relating to reading and interpretation of graphic displays is presented here.

Whenever you attempt to understand a graph, chart or table, it is important to remember the following:

• Different kinds of visual images are used for different purposes. When you interpret the information, you need to identify the aim of the image as well as the context in which it is used. You do this by reading around it: the caption, any accompanying notes, as well as the paragraphs before and after it.

• When reading a graphic image or table, consider the variables and extract only the information that is significant for your purpose.

• Provide a context for your written description of the contents of the image by means of an introductory sentence that gives an indication of the circumstances in which it was produced. Include such information as:
  • who drew it or provided the information that is presented in it;
  • when the information was collected;
  • for whom the information is intended; and
  • what is being measured, and against what.

• Study the image carefully and make sure that you understand it fully before you begin writing. Use the textual information outside it to introduce your analysis and interpretation.

• Use full sentences in your description.

• Focus on specific aspects, as required by your purpose in interpreting the visual image. Do not try to include everything that it presents. Remember that most visuals present trends and major patterns, so you should focus on these.

• Remember to use linking words, so that your interpretation is clear and easy to follow.
Figure 3.2: First-year university students’ preferences for examination question types. [NB. These charts are not based on actual surveys conducted anywhere.]

Example of how to read and interpret a chart

The charts in Figure 3.2 were produced by a lecturer at a South African university. They are based on data gathered from two questionnaires completed by 340 students enrolled on the lecturer’s academic literacies (AL) course. The purpose of the investigation was to compare and contrast student preferences for different types of examination questions on entry to university and then at the end of the year.

Before administration of the second questionnaire at the end of the year, the students had been introduced to the notion of question types, the characteristics of each type, and the best way to tackle them in tests and examinations. Conscious of the fact that essay-writing is central to many writing-intensive courses, the lecturer had adopted strategies to help students overcome their negative attitudes to continuous writing reflected in the pre-semester survey. Essay assignments were broken up into small chunks and, initially, much of the writing took place in class in the form of short, low-stakes writing tasks.

As can be seen from the chart, by the end of the year, students seemed to have gained much confidence in their ability to write essays, as their preference for this type of question had gone up significantly. This suggests that the lecturer’s focus on essay-writing in the course had had the desired effect. Another question type towards which there was some positive change in attitude was that involving interpretation of graphic information. Although the change amounted to only 5% compared to the figure in the pre-semester survey, it was still significant as
many students find conversion of graphic information to linear form quite a challenge. In contrast, preference for multiple-choice questions (MCQs) had declined significantly, from 40% to only 20%. It is possible that the lecturer deliberately scaled down the number of exercises involving MCQs, resulting in fewer students preferring them to other question types. Another significant change was in the students’ attitudes to short-answer questions, which went down from 26% to 16%, despite the fact that the low-stakes tasks assigned in class probably shared many of the characteristics of short-answer questions. There was little change in attitudes to layered questions.

The overall conclusion that can be drawn from these surveys is that, with sufficient scaffolding, writing tasks can be made less intimidating for students. At the same time, MCQs, which one might expect to be students’ question type of choice, can lose their attraction as confidence in extended writing capabilities grows.

What can you say about the manner in which the pie charts have been interpreted?

Note the following:

- A context has been provided for the interpretation, using the information given ‘outside’ the chart.
- An attempt has been made to produce a continuous narrative, in which there are links between sentences in each paragraph.
- There are inter-paragraph links that enhance the continuity of the narrative.
- The questions to which students have had a significant attitude change has been highlighted for the reader. Regardless of whether it has been positive or negative change.
- The last paragraph formally concludes the narrative.

In conclusion, it does not matter what visual image you are reading and interpreting: you need to do more than ‘read’ it. Simply reciting the percentages of the students’ preferences would not serve any useful purpose, because the reader can easily see all that information. What is important is to interpret the information and draw conclusions from it. In drawing these conclusions, however, you must be careful not to read more than is presented in the information given. Always remember to apply the following procedure when reading and interpreting visual images:

- Read the text outside the image (i.e. title, date, source and any notes).
- Read around the image (what is measured, compared or contrasted, as well as the units of measurement being used).
- Read inside the image (the bars in a graph, the slices in a pie chart, the images in a picture, and so on).

Reading and interpreting visual images effectively does not come easily to everyone; it takes practice to get it right.
CONCLUSION

Effective reading and success in higher education are inextricably intertwined. In other words, you cannot expect to be a good student unless you develop appropriate reading habits and strategies. Knowing your purpose in reading a particular text will help you determine which strategy, or combination of strategies, is essential for you to apply so that you get the most from the reading task.

Exercises

1. Take a chapter from a textbook that you are using in one of your courses. Read and annotate it, as discussed in the section on the first ‘R’, and make notes on a separate piece of paper. Apply the SQ3R method of study reading.

2. If there are questions at the end of the chapter that you have just annotated, answer them and see if you find the exercise easier than if you had read it without any annotation. If there are no questions provided, answer those that you set yourself as you were surveying and questioning the text before reading it.

3. Find a text with a graphic image in one of your textbooks and see if you can interpret it effectively following the steps described in Section 3.4.

References


This chapter enables you to understand the elements that constitute academic argument, including main claims and supporting evidence. When developing an academic argument, you also have to understand the difference between fact and opinion, and avoid generalisations and emotive language. These skills will enable you to make the necessary judgements about the evidence constituting an argument.

After studying this chapter, students should be able to:
• understand argument;
• understand main claims;
• understand supporting evidence;
• make judgements about evidence; and
• distinguish between.

4.1 Introduction

The concept of argument is a familiar one to most of us. We argue not only because we are annoyed but mostly because, through argument, we examine our own and others’ ideas carefully and critically. Argument is one of the high-order activities that define us as humans. Argument is all around us. It is found wherever there is disagreement, controversy, conflict, debate or questioning. Much of the communication you will experience in your everyday lives, in your careers or in your activities as a responsible citizen will contain argument and the call to express a point. It is said that rational controversy is essential to democratic public life, and that it is our duty as citizens to debate public issues, and not just leave this to experts and officials. Importantly, argument is also central to academic work and forms the basis of many of the texts you will encounter while studying. You may be surprised to learn that all the material you review is, or has been, debated by someone, somewhere, at some time. Even when the content you read or hear is presented as simple information or fact, it may just be one individual’s view and understanding of the facts. Most knowledge is arrived at through a process of inductive reasoning (i.e using specific examples to move to a conclusion).

Differences of opinion are the means by which human knowledge develops. When your opinion or point of view on an issue is supported or justified with suitable evidence or reasons, then you have made an argument. Therefore, when
you express opinions and offer reasons for them, you gain substantial experience of argumentation, which means the process of developing and presenting your reasoning. You may draw on this experience when you argue in an academic context.

4.2 Why understanding argument is important

It is essential to be able to follow argument if you want to be an effective reader and writer of academic texts. When you read, you will need to identify the writer’s position on the issue, or issues, discussed in the text. Importantly, you will also need to identify the ways the author provides support for his or her position. Finally, you will have to evaluate the support given. In other words, you will need to gauge whether you agree or disagree with the author’s stance, based on the evidence provided, beliefs arrived at through argumentation result from careful examination of the facts and expert opinion, and not from emotional or prejudiced responses.

Argument encourages us to:
• think about issues;
• understand issues without emotion or bias;
• discern contradictory claims;
• form opinions about the kind of evidence and way things have been investigated;
• state our thoughts plainly, correctly and reliably; and
• think about and respectfully consider other people’s ideas.

4.2.1 Understanding argument for reading purposes

Critical reading is a central part of understanding argument. Although some of the material you read will be very persuasive, remember to constantly question and evaluate what you read. Remember that the writer of every text has a view of his/her own and it may be the aim of the text to convince you of a certain opinion. To help you to work with texts, you should get into the habit of taking notes either in the margins of your source (if you are using a photocopy or your own book) or on a separate sheet as you read (see Chapter 3). Some students prefer to use highlighters when working with texts, but in some instances using a highlighter only does not always allow you to think through the important key points raised in a text. This is because a key part of your goal as a reader should be to put the author’s ideas in your own words. Making physical notes allows you to start this process. Then you can stop thinking of these ideas as facts and start thinking of them as arguments.

When you read, ask yourself questions like the following:
• What is the author trying to convince me of?
• Is the writer assuming that I will agree with everything written?
• Do I agree with the writer and, if not, what are the key points of difference in our thinking?
• Does the author provide enough evidence for his or her argument?
• What kind of evidence does the author use?
• Is there something he or she does not consider that I would include?

4.2.2 Understanding argument for writing purposes
When you begin to write a paper, ask yourself: ‘What is my point or claim?’ If your assignments do not have a main claim or a strong point of view, they cannot be arguing for anything. Asking yourself what your claim is helps you avoid an assignment that has no focus or direction. Consider this: lecturers more than likely know a lot more than you do about your subject or essay topic. Why, then, would you want to provide them only with information they already have? Lecturers are also usually looking for the following:
• evidence that shows you understand the material you are working with; and
• your ability to apply your knowledge of the material in an original way and in so doing persuade your reader.

The most common argumentative structure is deductive. This means that you start off with a generalisation or assertion, and then you provide support for it. This pattern can be used to structure just a paragraph or an entire assignment. Another possible structure is inductive. This entails a review of facts, examples or observations, followed by a conclusion.

The most effective argument reflects a focused mind, which attempts to make sense of the world – a mind where insightfulness, reason and clarity are joined.

4.3 Definition of argument
Argumentation means arguing for a certain position (or viewpoint) by:
• offering strong evidence to support one’s claim (viewpoint);
• considering the audience or reader; and
• considering and refuting the opposing argument (known as the counter-argument).

The goal of argument is to get your reader, or audience, to agree with your central claim/s despite a possible opposing argument. Thus, you set out to persuade your reader. Your reader or audience will then judge what you have written or said, and gauge whether you have stated your ideas clearly, and whether your ideas are well investigated and supported or not.
Chapter 4: Understanding Academic Argument

The components of an argument are:

- **claim** – your viewpoint.
- **evidence** – support for your claim. This evidence may take the form of examples, facts, scientific findings/experimental proof, statistics and statements by qualified authorities. All the sources of this evidence must be referenced appropriately (see Chapter 7). Think of evidence as developing, explaining, understanding and illustrating your viewpoint. You need to convince your reader that you are well informed.
- **counter-argument(s)** – acknowledgement of opposition.

Note the following components of evidence:

- **facts** – can be proven.
- **expert opinions or quotations** – based on research generated by authorities or experts in the field of study and referenced.
- **definitions** – statements of meaning of words or phrases.
- **statistics** – offer precise support.
- **examples** – clear, tangible illustrations of a point.

Figure 4.1: The structure of argument
4.4 The claim (viewpoint)

The claim is the main point of your argument; it is your viewpoint. The claim is set out in a proposition statement at the start of an academic assignment. A proposition statement is where you state your opinion clearly, usually in the introduction. You also have to place your argument in a context – for example, where, when, how. Finally, your claim should be open to debate. In other words, although you are sure of your viewpoint, you will be required to prove it to your reader.

The following points are important to remember when formulating your proposition statement:

- **It should be debatable.** People should be able to agree or disagree with your claim. In other words, the statement should be controversial, which means that people will have strong, different opinions about it. For example, ‘Women tend to use a more democratic and participative leadership and management style, whereas men adopt a more autocratic and directive leadership style.’ An example of a statement that is not debatable would be: ‘Men cannot have babies.’

- **It should not be self-evident** (an obvious statement of fact). For example, ‘Organisational integration implies that every function and employee in a business should work together to satisfy the needs of the customer and maximise profitability.’

- **It should not claim something that is only a matter of opinion.** For example, ‘Women prefer to stay at home to raise their children rather than climb corporate ladders.’

- **It should be expressed clearly and precisely in the introduction to your essay.** It should not be vague or too general. A statement like ‘Some people in the workplace cause trouble for everyone’ is weak because it does not make clear what the writer has in mind. It is a vague generalisation. A more precise version might be ‘A small group of people in the workplace in question seem intent on disrupting the environment for the employees in the company.’

4.5 Evidence (support or substantiation)

There are three basic questions a reader will ask in response to the claims of a writer:

- What grounds does the writer have for this claim/viewpoint?
- How does he or she know this?
- On what authority does the writer make this claim or hold this viewpoint?

Your goal in the argument is to defend your claim as true or probable. You do this by substantiating your claim by means of sufficient evidence and reasons.
Your objective is to make a case, so that your reader is convinced of the feasibility and likelihood of your claim/viewpoint. The first step, even before you start to write, is collecting and sorting out evidence and classifying it according to type and suitability. You might decide to move from the most insignificant piece of evidence to the most important; or you might start with the most convincing, then mention other supporting details later. You may choose to hold back a surprising piece of evidence until the very end.

Remember that you cannot write a statement in your assignment without saying where you got your information from. It is good to keep asking yourself as you write, ‘How do I know this? Where did I see this? Can I support this with examples or statistics?’ In addition, a statement means little without supporting examples. This is why good research and referencing are so important (see Chapter 7).

4.5.1 Characteristics of strong evidence
The following list provides the criteria needed for strong, substantial and credible evidence:

- there is a sufficient amount of evidence;
- the evidence is comprehensive enough;
- the evidence is current and relevant;
- the evidence is verifiable (including proper referencing);
- the authority is dependable and applicable;
- the experience is distinctive and relevant;
- the statistics are trustworthy, applicable, appropriate and well researched; and
- the right connections between the pieces of evidence have been made.

4.5.2 Fact and opinion
Your evidence can be in the form of a fact or an opinion. A fact is a statement that can be verified (i.e., proven to be true). As a writer, you should be able to validate facts if required. Most often, you will do this by referring to an authoritative source. Facts are continually being updated and revised as a consequence of research. It is therefore important that you refer to the most current sources possible.

An opinion is a statement of interpretation and judgement. Opinions are actually arguments, and should be based on evidence if they are to be substantial. Opinions are not true or false in the same way as statements of fact. Rather, opinions are either more substantiated or less substantiated. You can strengthen your own argument by referring to the opinions of authorities in your field with whom you agree. Quote experts when their language is particularly powerful or succinct; otherwise, it is better to summarise or paraphrase.
Figure 4.2 categorises evidence into hard and soft types of evidence. Informal argument usually draws on soft evidence. This includes experience, emotion and appeals to ethics. Academic writing requires hard evidence, such as statistics, examples and appeals to authority.

**Tip**

Remember that you need to define central terms that appear in your assignment. Doing this shows your reader that you have a clear and accurate understanding of the key term that directly relates to the main claim you are discussing. Remember always to put yourself in your reader’s shoes; then ask yourself if there are any improvements you can make to strengthen your argument.

### 4.6 Anticipating opposition

As mentioned, one essential characteristic of argument is the sense of an opposing argument, or opposite viewpoints, to yours. Remember that you are not just explaining a concept to someone who will simply listen to you and accept or reject your idea on its merit. Argument means that there is active opposition to your claim. To persuade your audience, you must not only explain and support your proposition, but also anticipate, acknowledge, understand and overcome objections (or counter-arguments) that opposing views might raise. Therefore it is important to review evidence that could be used to counter your idea and generate responses to anticipated objections.
This is the crucial concept of counter-argument: if nothing can be said against an idea, it is probably too obvious or inane. If too much can be said against it, it is most likely time to find a more suitable claim. By not acknowledging possible objections, you might seem to be avoiding something and your argument may then be weakened. You should also recognise misleading notions that might undermine an argument. Perhaps the best way to make certain that you have thought out an argument in its entirety is to arrange ideas into a ‘pro’ and ‘con’ table, in which you weigh the argument (claims) and counter-argument (counter-claims) (see Table 4.1).

For example, consider this proposition statement: ‘Social networking sites are detrimental to human relationships and activities.’ Now consider some of the pros and cons of this statement. After you have done this, you can put your concepts into paragraphs.

Table 4.1: Weighing claims and counter-claims

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pros (for social networking: why social networking is good)</th>
<th>Cons (against social networking: why social networking is detrimental)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Social networking sites communicate useful and important information faster than any other media. This information can be lifesaving.</td>
<td>Social media can communicate false, unreliable and inaccurate information.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Law enforcement uses social networking sites to catch and prosecute criminals.</td>
<td>Individuals use social media for illegal and even dangerous criminal activities.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social media sites help employers find employees and job-seekers to find potential employment.</td>
<td>Social media can harm those in jobs and affect employment prospects, as personal information can be easily exposed.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social networking allows people to stay in touch and improve relationships as well as make new friends. It supports shy people and those who are socially isolated, such as senior citizens.</td>
<td>People have far less face-to-face interaction because of the influence of social media. For instance, people who constantly text during meals do not engage in the art of conversation. Many people have had experiences on social networking sites that have caused friendships to end. Social media exacerbate feelings of depression, low self-esteem and eating disorders.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social networking sites offer educationalists a way to teach and communicate with fellow teachers and students. They keep knowledge and information current.</td>
<td>Students who are frequent social-media users have lower marks. Social media are a distraction rather than an academic enhancer. Social media also promote cheating.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
4.6.1 Refuting and conceding
Developing arguments against opposing views – that is, against the counter-arguments – is known as refuting. You need to show first that you have understood the counter-argument, and sometimes you need to concede that the opposition’s claim is valid. Where possible, however, highlight the weakness in the opposing argument or point of view. If you can demonstrate that your case is solid and that the opposing views are weak, you will be more readily able to convince your reader.

4.6.2 Checks for anticipating and refuting opposition
The following questions will help to anticipate and refute opposition to your argument:

• How strong are the opposing viewpoints?
• What arguments might there be against my claim/viewpoint?
• How can I disprove (refute) any counter-arguments?
• Is there anything that I will have to concede to?
• Which of my claims might be easily discredited by an opposing argument?
• Can I see any weak links in the opposing claims/viewpoints?

4.7 Checks for a strong argument
There are a number of things you should avoid to prevent a weak, unsatisfactory and easily discredited argument. These include:

• excessive emotive language;
• generalisation and absolute statements; and
• assumptions.

These are discussed further in the following sections.

4.7.1 Excessive emotion
Although an argument that is carefully reasoned and honestly presented may benefit from a little emotion, an argument founded mostly on feelings and emotions will probably be superficial and biased. Emotional appeals, therefore, must be used discreetly and with restraint or they may prove counterproductive.

Careful word choice influences the emotional appeal of an argument. The impression of bias is created when you use words that appear factual but are actually emotionally loaded with either favourable or unfavourable associations. Remember, it is your argument that must convince readers. A good, clear, well-supported argument will not need emotional appeals to persuade a reader to accept your viewpoint.
4.7.2 Generalisation and absolute statements

There are a number of ways to keep generalisations or absolute statements out of your argument:

- Avoid words that state an absolute situation, such as ‘all’, ‘always’, ‘never’, ‘constantly’, ‘every’. Also avoid implying these words in sentences like ‘[All] people like working for large companies’; or ‘[All] managers make structural changes only if they feel subordinates agree with them.’
- Use concrete examples, specific people and contexts, and verifiable statistics.
- Use qualifying words and phrases (see Table 4.2), particularly when you are writing about what people do and say.

### Table 4.2: Examples of qualifying words and phrases

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Usually</th>
<th>Often</th>
<th>A lot</th>
<th>Customarily</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nearly</td>
<td>Occasionally</td>
<td>Many</td>
<td>A little bit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some</td>
<td>Sometimes</td>
<td>A great deal</td>
<td>Ordinarily</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Generally</td>
<td>A few</td>
<td>Most</td>
<td>Almost all</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

4.7.3 Assumptions

Assumptions are unstated pieces of information that the writer takes for granted. It is difficult to recognise assumptions in our own writing because we automatically fill in the missing information in our heads. You should avoid assumptions in your writing because not everyone takes the same things for granted or shares the same implied (unstated) information.

4.7.4 Pointers to help validate a strong argument

There are many ways in which people go against the basic rules of clear thinking when constructing an argument. Remember that your argument must contain logic and reason. You should not make generalisations; instead, you should rely on facts that are supported by evidence. You should avoid emotion or biased language; instead, make clear statements supported by examples or by authoritative voices: these are reliable scholars in a field of study. To check the strength of your argument, ask yourself the following questions:

- Does the evidence sufficiently support and endorse the general conclusions that the writer has come to?
- Has all the evidence been considered, or only evidence that favours the writer’s position?
- Has the writer considered all the alternatives, or only chosen to take note of one or two?
• Are conclusions ever arrived at from questionable generalisations?
• Are words always used plainly, correctly and reliably?
• Does the argument depend on emotional, subjective language?
• Does the argument ever suggest that ideas or policies are good or bad simply because they are connected to certain individuals or groups?
• Does the writer ever argue by using an analogy – that is, by comparing one thing to another? If so, is the comparison (analogy) convincing?
• Does the argument suggest that an idea or course of action is good just because everyone else believes so or is following that course of action?

**Constructing an argument: Important points to remember**

Constructing a solid argument starts with the introduction (opening paragraph) of your assignment. You might want to consider writing your introduction and conclusion (final paragraph) only after you have written the body of your assignment. This is because the introduction and conclusion rely on what was stated or argued in the body. (See Chapter 7, which covers assignment writing, for detailed information about the features and structure of an introduction and conclusion.) Remember that the introduction and conclusion are linked. This means that whatever you set out to prove in the beginning of the assignment matches the proof presented at the end. In both the introduction and the conclusion, you must be able to clearly identify the main claim or argument.

The keywords that you use in the introduction must appear again in the conclusion. These keywords usually come from the assignment question. It is important that you clearly understand all the keywords in the assignment question. You need to write your own definition of them and check your definitions in a dictionary (see Chapter 2). Once you are certain that you understand all the keywords, including the task and content words, then you can use them in your writing. Without understanding the keywords, it is unlikely that you will understand the assignment question. The result is that you will write off topic.

**CONCLUSION**

The ability to express your thoughts and views in academic argument provides you with the opportunity to express your critical thinking and to grow as a student. Once you have worked through the above points pertaining to your argument and linked your main ideas to the introduction and conclusion of your assignment, then you will have taken the steps toward making your argument and reasoning clear and accessible to your reader.
When analysing an opinion piece, read through the text carefully, making your own notes on the writer’s argument. As you read, ask yourself the following questions to identify the structure and form of the argument presented in the text:

- What is the main claim of the argument presented in the text?
- Is the supporting information relevant to the main claim and other claims that constitute the argument?
- What claims do you agree with, and why?
- What claims do you disagree with, and why?
- Are counter-arguments considered? How do you know?
- Is there any evidence of bias or emotive language, or personal, unsupported opinion, on the part of the writer?
- Can you identify that the main claim/argument in the assignment is, for example, the need for managers to have human skills?
- Can you identify the reasons mentioned in the assignment that support this claim?
- Can you recognise that the writer makes the point that human skills are so important that managers should be trained to develop them?
- Do you have a sense of finality and closure?

Exercises

Decide whether the following sentences could work as proposition statements (✓ if appropriate, ✗ if inappropriate). If not, provide a reason, following the format of exercise 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CLAIM</th>
<th>✓/✗</th>
<th>REASON</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Money is the root of all evil</td>
<td>✗</td>
<td>opinion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. A medium-sized business is one that employs up to 200 people and has a turnover of between R5 million and R64 million.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. In these modern times, widespread corruption has an impact economically as well as politically.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Barack Hussein Obama II (born 4 August 1961) was the 44th president of the United States. He was the first African-American to hold the office.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. There is too much bureaucratic red tape in this world for the average citizen to feel free.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Academic Literacy

6. The government should reduce interest rates; otherwise people’s ability to spend will be constrained.

7. Nothing is better than the freedom of working your own hours.

When you are constructing a proposition statement it is helpful to remember to use qualifying words and phrases to avoid generalisations, particularly when you are writing about people and their activities. The words in the table are examples of qualifying words. Can you see the difference between words like ‘all’ and ‘part’? If you say ‘all’, that may be considered an extreme generalisation. It is safer to say ‘part’ or use words that indicate you are aware that generalised statements are not academic.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>not much/not many</th>
<th>wholly/all</th>
<th>nearly half</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>more than half</td>
<td>a small part</td>
<td>a large part</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>practically all</td>
<td>a considerable part</td>
<td>part</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Now practise creating your own proposition statements. Try to think of issues that interest you or that are pertinent to your studies. Write two proposition statements that you would like to write about. It might help to use the word ‘should’ and, of course, qualifying words.

Read through the following example of a short student assignment. Consider its value as an argumentative essay.

**Women in the workplace**

The workplace has experienced significant developments with regards to fair and equal employment of men and women. In many countries, women have caught up with men in terms of education, and in some instances have surpassed men in educational achievement. Moreover, even though the contribution of men to housework and childcare has grown significantly over the past few decades, it is still largely below the level that women contribute.

Currently, men and women are moving into the labour force in equal numbers. However, the majority of top management positions are still largely populated by men. The number of women occupying sought-after positions in South Africa has remained constant at 30 per cent of all candidates placed, despite companies’ gender-equity policies.
Although many companies have made it a priority to promote and appoint female employees at senior levels, the statistics show there has been little improvement at senior-management level for women (HR future).

It can be argued that the failure of more women to break into the upper echelons of corporate management is because of the existence of a ‘glass ceiling’. In economics, the term ‘glass ceiling’ refers to situations where the advancement of a qualified person within the hierarchy of an organisation is frozen at a lower level because of some form of discrimination.

There are several reasons that could explain why the glass ceiling exists. One of the reasons is job segregation. Job segregation includes the concentration of women and men in different kinds and levels of activity and/or employment. Traditionally, men tend to be drawn and clustered into the upper levels of professions, and occupy positions such as managers, supervisors and executives. Subsequently, women are deemed to fill so-called lower-paid professions, such as teachers, secretaries, receptionists or nurses, and they occupy lower positions in organisations.

Further stereotyping can be found in constructed workplace narratives that further polarise men and women. For instance, there is the long-held belief that women measure success in the workplace differently from men because women place a higher value on their positive interpersonal relationships and feelings, whereas men tend to measure success by high salaries, promotional opportunities and job titles.

Then there is the argument that the glass ceiling is voluntarily chosen by some women. In this scenario, men tend to work harder to get high salaries and top positions. Conversely, women are disposed to work fewer hours or may not want to extend their work hours. This is so that they may spend more quality time with their children and in their households.

Adding to this account is the popular notion that women may leave a job when they want to get married and begin a family. Accordingly, organisations have usually been less likely to invest in women’s careers. Furthermore, women have often been required to show much more dedication and willingness than men to take on new challenges or risks, and be vocal about their personal ambitions.

Possibly the most obvious of all the categorisations of working women can be seen in the discourse of leadership. Leaders are meant to be powerful and unsentimental, which are qualities often ascribed to men. Lacking strength and having too much sentiment are frequently equated with the feminine and, more specifically, with motherhood. Thus it follows that men would not take time off for a sick child or a family matter. This is the domain of women, barring exceptional circumstances.
It is therefore risky for a woman to occupy a position of power, as she may be easily distracted by domestic responsibilities.

In an attempt to respond to working women, who seemingly carry all the caregiving responsibilities, employers have sought to provide family-friendly environments, with options such as flexitime, employee-assistance programmes and on-site childcare facilities. These facilities may allow women to have a better chance of balancing their work and home lives.

Although these appear to be solid options, the problem remains because many working women continue to have two jobs – one at home and one at work. Additionally, there is a need in many high-status jobs to put in very long working hours, which means that women need to leave the more routine aspects of daily life – such as cooking, grocery shopping and collecting the children – to others. However, this is not always a satisfying option for families. External childcare may also be very expensive and unreliable.

Moreover, there are residual issues with how equality programmes are presented and realised in organisations. For instance, women may feel reluctant to take advantage of equality programmes, as they could feel it may lessen their chances of being successful. Women often feel discriminated against for choosing alternative working programmes or schedules.

Consequently, if equality-enhancement programmes are to be instituted and adhered to, they have to be transparent. An example of this kind of fair reform can be found in a company called Banco do Brazil. This was the first financial institution in Brazil to allow women employees six months’ maternity leave on full pay, which is also available if they adopt children who are under eight. The company has additionally exceeded Brazilian national requirements of 120 days for paid maternity leave by more than six weeks. Moreover, women are entitled to return to the same job they were holding before leave, in order to avoid adverse effects on their career advancement (Women’s Empowerment Principles).

Perhaps a better-known company that leads the way in terms of balancing the workplace and understanding the demands of modern women is Coca-Cola. The company has an empowerment initiative called 5by20. The aim of this initiative is to enable the economic empowerment of 5 million women entrepreneurs across the company’s value chain by 2020. Through 5by20, women entrepreneurs around the world – from fruit farmers to retailers to artisans – will have access to training courses in business skills, financial services and support networks of peers or mentors to address the barriers they face to business success (Women’s Empowerment Principles).
This type of reform seems to represent a new way of perceiving women in the workplace. Another example is evident in a company called Allens, a leading international law firm with partners, lawyers and corporate-services staff that boasts a global network spanning 40 offices in 29 countries. Since 2002, its professional development programmes have specifically focused on the engagement, career and professional development, including promotion, of women in the company through structured mentoring (Women’s Empowerment Principles).

These examples serve as ways of accommodating individuals’ needs in the workplace without judgement or age-old preconceptions. Further investigation and monitoring of such workplace configurations are needed. It would appear that, rather than telling women to be more confident and ambitious, or to choose career over family, it is more valuable to think about how workplaces need to adapt to the holistic development of both women and men.

Finally, deeming that women must have limiting roles serves only to confine men to a stereotypical existence as well. What is needed is for the workplace to find an enhanced balance between working and spending time with family, friends and community. As a society, it is essential to continue to encourage people to go beyond typecasts and recognise the contributions that each individual, male or female, can make to the workplace and to relationships.

Questions

1. What is the assignment’s main claim?

2. What are the other claims mentioned in the assignment?

3. What are the counter-claims that the writer introduces?

4. Has the writer achieved unity in the text? Note at least three linking words used by the writer to signal connection between ideas.

5. What does the writer set out to do in the final paragraph?

6. Do you think this is a convincing argumentative assignment? Motivate your answer and suggest ways in which this assignment could be further improved.
Academic Literacy

(The references for this assignment are listed.) A good assignment is a synthesis of your research and your ideas. Another word for synthesis is mixture. Think of your research as a recipe: you add in many ingredients (ideas from your research) and then you mix them together. This mixture results in a dish. Think of the dish as your assignment that is compiled from different sources. (See Chapter 7 for more thoughts on the writing process.)

References


Chapter 5

Plagiarism, Paraphrasing and Summarising

Cecilia Dube

Purpose

Often, when students have difficulty understanding the texts they have to read in preparation for written assignments, they resort to copying large chunks of text taken directly from other authors and including these in their assignments. The purpose of this chapter, which focuses on the critical skills of paraphrasing and summarising, is to help you avoid plagiarism by reading with greater understanding, so that you produce written texts that are of your own creation.

After studying this chapter, students should be able to:

• understand what plagiarism is;
• avoid plagiarism;
• identify the main ideas in a text;
• identify the topic sentence in a paragraph;
• rephrase the author’s words;
• write clear sentences; and
• make study notes, including mind maps and outlines, from textbooks and other sources.

5.1 Introduction

Chapter 3 was about reading for study purposes. You will remember the focus of that chapter was on getting you to read with deeper understanding. However, once you have understood the content of a text, you have to apply this knowledge in some form of academic context, be it an essay, a report or an examination. As you do this, you have to guard against the temptation first, to copy whole sentences, paragraphs or longer pieces of text from the original and, second, to pretend that the ideas that you have used in your assignment originated from you. Either of these actions constitutes what is called plagiarism.

5.2 What is plagiarism?

A simple definition of plagiarism is intentionally or unintentionally passing off another person’s work as your own. You are deemed to have committed plagiarism if you:

• copy from a text, word for word, without using quotation marks and citing the source;
• in citing a primary source, give the impression that you read the text yourself when you are simply repeating a review by your secondary source; or
• put ideas in your own words but fail to cite the source of those ideas.

Lecturers view all forms of plagiarism in a very serious light, and there may be heavy penalties imposed on you if you plagiarise. Penalties may include receiving no mark for your work or being reported to the higher-education authorities for a more severe penalty. The reason these penalties are imposed is that plagiarism is a form of theft, because you are stealing someone else’s intellectual property. However, it is important to note that there is a body of information that is regarded as common knowledge, for which you do not have to cite the source. For example, if you read the words ‘the sun rises in the east’ in a book, no one would expect you to cite a source for that information.

You need to be aware of some of the causes of plagiarism, so that you may avoid them if you recognise them in your own writing behaviour. Listed below are some of the most common causes:
• being afraid that you will fail an assignment if you try to use only your own work. This happens mostly if you do not understand the assignment question or the key concepts in a particular topic, underlining the need to unpack assignment questions carefully, and then to do all the reading that is necessary to answer them fully;
• waiting until the last moment to write your assignments, only to find that you have not given yourself enough time to do the necessary research. The simple solution to this problem is to manage your time in such a way that you give yourself sufficient time to prepare for and write assignments;
• not being fully aware of the consequences of plagiarism. It is said that ignorance is no defence, so you need to familiarise yourself with the procedures that are in place to deal with plagiarism. Your lecturer will know what these are;
• not knowing what constitutes plagiarism (This chapter will help you here.); and
• not taking the trouble to learn how to cite your sources correctly. Learning to do so takes a lot of practice: there are no short cuts.

5.2.1 Why you should not plagiarise other writers’ work
There are a number of reasons why you should avoid the temptation to plagiarise any form of copy, whether it is from a printed source or the Internet. Firstly, as you hand in an assignment that has been partially copied from some other source, you know that you are cheating and cannot therefore derive any satisfaction from your work. You deprive yourself of an opportunity to prove your own worth and to learn from the experience of writing that assignment yourself.
Another reason is that, more often than not, lecturers can tell when an assignment has been taken from someone else’s writing. What gives you away is that this assignment will suddenly be like nothing else that you have ever produced, immediately alerting your lecturer to the possibility that it is not, in fact, your own work. Even if only parts of the assignment have been copied from another writer’s work, these will stand out for the same reason. In many instances, particularly if you have cut and pasted from the Internet, the lecturer can easily locate the original source. Trying to cut corners this way is not worth the risk because you will almost certainly be caught out.

But perhaps the most compelling reason is that, by copying other people’s work, you deprive yourself of the chance to learn and develop your own expertise in your discipline or field of study. The purpose of most assignments is to give you the opportunity to read as widely as possible around a topic, and then synthesise what you have read and present your own perspective on it. In that way, you develop knowledge through your assignment. You cannot do that if what you present for assessment is copied from other writers. Besides, unauthorised use of another person's intellectual property might result in legal action being taken against you.

5.2.2 Online software to detect plagiarism

Not all plagiarism is deliberate, however. Often, you are not even aware that you have reproduced another writer’s work. For this reason, you need to familiarise yourself with free online anti-plagiarism software. You can use this technology to detect and eliminate plagiarism from your work. When you log in to the software’s website, you will find instructions on how to conduct a search for plagiarised text in your assignment.

One anti-plagiarism software brand that you might want to try out is called Plag Tracker. This software uses a three-step online process. First, it allows you to upload whole papers or sections of a paper onto its website. Second, it scans the text for plagiarism and, third, it produces a report within a couple of minutes that identifies the plagiarised passages, if any, and then directs you to a source to which you can then attribute the information. If you have not copied anything from other sources, the report will say ‘content appears in 0 sources’.

Another brand that you might like to try out is Plagiarisma, to which you can subscribe online free of charge. You submit a text of up to 2 000 words and receive a report by email indicating what percentage of your writing is free of plagiarism. An Internet search for other free online anti-plagiarism software will lead you to more such programmes.
Some anti-plagiarism software, such as Turnitin, is not free but institutions acquire its licence, so that lecturers can use it to check students’ work to ensure that it is original. Another brand, Grammarly – which you also need to pay to use – provides you with the opportunity to try it out first by pasting some text into a box, which appears on screen the moment you open its web page. Your text is checked instantly for plagiarism, as well as grammar, spelling, punctuation, wordiness and sentence structure, before a report is displayed on screen. To find out details of the weaknesses in your writing, however, you have to create an account and select a payment plan. You are then given a week’s free access to the programme before you have to decide whether or not to subscribe to it.

Knowing that institutions have means of detecting plagiarised work should serve as motivation for you to ensure that the assignments that you hand in for assessment are your own original work and not copied from other writers.

To obviate the need to constantly subject your writing to scrutiny in the manner described above, you should therefore adopt appropriate strategies to eliminate plagiarism from your writing. For example, whenever you find it necessary to quote verbatim from any source, you should enclose the words in quotation marks and then cite the source, including page numbers, in brackets after the quotation (refer to the referencing section in Chapter 7 for information on how to quote and reference correctly).

However, because direct quotations should be used sparingly, you should rather avoid plagiarism by paraphrasing or summarising the texts you read for assignments. These two topics are discussed in the following sections.

### 5.3 How to avoid plagiarism

#### 5.3.1 Paraphrasing

Paraphrasing is a key skill that you, as a student, need to develop in order to increase your chances of reading texts with understanding and being able to recall the content when you need to.

**What is a paraphrase?**

A paraphrase can be defined as an accurate, simpler restatement of the content of a piece of text without alteration of the original meaning. Many students struggle to acquire the skill of paraphrasing because, firstly, they do not understand why they have to do it and, secondly, it takes much effort to get it right. However, paraphrasing becomes easier the more you practise it. When paraphrasing, the emphasis is on rephrasing or restating the content of the original text – it has
nothing to do with shortening the original text. In fact, a paraphrase can be longer than the text that is being paraphrased.

It is essential for you to acquire this skill for a number of reasons:

• Paraphrasing helps you to understand even very difficult texts because it requires you to rephrase the original text in your own words. The requirement that you use your own words forces you to try to understand the original text before rendering the meaning in your own words.

• It helps you avoid plagiarising someone else’s words. By referencing the paraphrase, you acknowledge that the ideas are not your own, either.

• It allows you to reduce the number of direct quotations in your writing.

• Your written text will flow better because it does not consist of a mixture of your own language and what you have copied from your sources and tried to pass off as your own.

• You avoid the temptation to skip difficult paragraphs in the texts that you read.

**How to paraphrase**

You should not attempt to paraphrase long pieces of text. The technique is best applied to short pieces of difficult text so that you understand their meaning. Therefore, you should apply it to no more than a phrase, a sentence or a short paragraph. Effective paraphrasing requires you to follow a set of well-defined steps:

• **Step 1**: Skim the text, so that you get an overview of the content.

• **Step 2**: Read the sentence or paragraph actively and make sure that you have understood its content. Focus on the main idea and main supporting details.

• **Step 3**: Without looking at the original text, rewrite each main point and the main supporting details in your own words.

• **Step 4**: As you work through the text, change the structure of the original by taking any of the following steps as appropriate:
  • Break up long sentences into shorter, more manageable chunks, then rephrase each part to form a new sentence.
  • Combine short sentences into one where possible, and use a simpler structure in your new sentence.
  • Change active voice to passive, and direct to indirect speech.
  • Change the order in which ideas are presented in a paragraph but, in doing so, avoid changing the original meaning of the text.

• **Step 5**: Finally, read through your paraphrase and compare it with the original text to ensure that you have not inadvertently plagiarised the author’s language or altered the meaning.
**Example of a paraphrase**

The paragraph below, though quite short, makes use of language that may not be accessible to everyone. If you wanted to incorporate it into an assignment that you were writing, you would have to put it into your own words without changing its meaning.

Stephen Fry seems to take an ambivalent, but generally positive, view of the potential of Internet communication to transcend the limitations of conventional communication. In particular, he suggests that there may be something empowering about electronic communication for some people.

*Source: Yates (1996)*

**Proceed in this manner:**

- Read the paragraph actively and try to understand what it is saying about the Internet.
- Focus on the difficult words and phrases in the text and try to work out their meaning from the context.
- Now express the ideas contained in the text in your own words without changing the original meaning.

Now consider this new version of the paragraph above, and check whether it still conveys the same meaning as the original:

Although Stephen Fry expresses some doubt about whether the Internet is a better means of communication than others, he believes that it makes it possible for people to express their views freely.

**Points to note:**

- The two sentences have been combined into one (it is not necessary to retain the same number of sentences as in the original).
- The paragraph now begins with ‘Although’ to make it easier to combine the two ideas contained in the original paragraph.

The thing to remember about paraphrasing is that your purpose is to simplify or clarify. If you incorporated this paraphrase into an assignment, you would have to cite its source, as explained in Chapter 7.

**5.3.2 Summarising**

Like paraphrasing, summarising is a key skill, which, though not easy to acquire, is nonetheless critical for successful study at university. Well-developed summarising
skills make it possible for you to gather information from various sources to integrate into your assignments.

What is a summary?
With paraphrasing, your main concern is to interpret and present ideas in a short piece of text in your own words. A summary, however, is very different. The purpose of a summary is to shorten the original text by selecting only the main ideas and major supporting details, and then combining these into a shortened version of the original. Another difference between a paraphrase and a summary is that, whereas you apply paraphrasing to short pieces of text, summarising can be used with texts of any length, from one paragraph to a whole chapter in a book. Although your intention in a summary is not necessarily to rephrase the text that you are working with, you still have to use your own words as far as possible. This is particularly important when you are gathering information for an assignment, as failure to use your own words may result in plagiarism.

How to summarise
Writing meaningful summaries takes practice. If you follow the steps listed below, you should be able to summarise effectively:

• Begin by identifying the topic of the text. What is it all about? You can find the answer to this question only by browsing through the text for an overview of its content.

• Read quickly through the introduction and conclusion in order to locate the main points that the writer makes.

• Identify the major sections into which it is divided, so that you can work with these more manageable chunks of text. You will probably find that each section focuses on a particular main point.

• Now read the text actively, annotating as you go along. (Refer to Chapter 3 for a full description of how to annotate a text.)

• Make a note on each paragraph, or, if the paragraphs are short or do not make complete sense on their own, combine them in such a way that the point being made is clear.

• Now combine the notes you have made into a paragraph or paragraphs. This will depend on the length of the original text and whether the sections into which it is divided are sub-topics in themselves.

• Do not include minor details or examples.

• Do not change the meaning of the original text.

• If you are summarising for the purpose of including the information in an assignment, do not forget to cite the source. The citation is normally placed at the beginning of a long summary.
If you must quote directly from the text in your summary, be careful not to mix the author's words with yours. Indicate all quotations by means of quotation marks, and then cite the page number(s) so that a reader can locate the quoted part quickly.

Example of a summary

Summarise the following text:
In order for a business to be successful it is essential that it must have a management system capable of ensuring that the business can achieve its goals and objectives. The ISO 9000 series of standards relates to the Quality Management System. However, as businesses tend to have one system, formalising the system to focus solely on quality will have no real benefits to your business. Therefore, it is necessary to move away from a system focusing wholly on quality, to a system that focuses on all the characteristics of your business.

The main reason your business is in existence is to meet the requirements and expectations of your customers and other persons concerned (employees, suppliers, and so on,) in such a way that you have an advantage over your competitors. In addition to this, another objective must be to gain, sustain and develop your business's performance and resources.

As a means of achieving improvements within your business, you should ensure that your business employs the key principles that are fundamental to ISO 9001:2000. These are: (1) customer focus; (2) involvement of people; (3) leadership; (4) a process approach; (5) a factual approach; (6) a system approach; (7) continual improvements; (8) mutually beneficial supplier relationships. Following the principles highlighted above ensures that your business focuses on what your customers actually require and not what they think they require.

To achieve success from your business, you must ensure that it adopts a management system which ensures continual improvement and is focused on your customers. To achieve this objective, your business management system must contain systems and processes that are easily understood by the individuals within your business. It is also crucial that these systems can be managed easily and improvements made if they are necessary without any detrimental effect on the day-to-day operation of your business.

The processes within your management system must be capable of being measured to ensure they are performing as required. It does also mean that, when setting these key performance indicators, intelligent thought is given to the areas that you are measuring. It is worth remembering that individuals are likely to improve in areas in which they are being measured. Therefore it is critical that any process measuring is carried out in areas that will benefit the system and your business as a whole.

Source: Adapted from ‘Business management systems’ (2008)
In the text above, the main points and topic sentences have been underlined (NB: Both sentences in the second paragraph have been underlined because each gives a reason for the existence of a business.) The next step is to make point-form notes or a mind map, using only the underlined sentences. Your point-form notes might look something like this:

- Effective business management system = business success.
- Aims of business: outdo competitors in meeting stakeholder needs; growth of business.
- Need to implement ISO 9001:2000 principles for continuous improvement of business.
- Management system must focus on ensuring continuous improvement and customer satisfaction.
- Need for processes within management system for assessment of effectiveness.

It is also possible to present these notes in the form of a mind map, if you find this easier. The notes might look something like Figure 5.1:

![Figure 5.1: Using a mind map to summarise text](image-url)
Model summary

The summary would read something like the example that follows:

An effective business management system is one that ensures the success of the business. In order to outdo competitors in meeting the needs of stakeholders, and to ensure that your business grows at the same time, you should implement the ISO 9001:2000 principles, which promote the continuous improvement of your business. Your management system should therefore aim to promote the growth of the business and ensure that it meets the needs of your customers. The system should also have built-in processes for assessing the effectiveness of the business.

By focusing only on the main ideas, which are contained in the underlined topic sentences, this model summary has reduced the text to about one fifth of its original length. You could, if you wanted to, include some of the major supporting details – for example, the eight ISO 9001:2000 principles, which would make the summary a little longer.

CONCLUSION

The skills of paraphrasing and summarising are critical for academic success. It is essential to try to develop them early in your higher-education career, for two main reasons. First, they will help you avoid the temptation to plagiarise other writers’ words or ideas and, second, they will help you to develop the ability to read academic texts with greater understanding than you would otherwise.

Exercises
1. Take an assignment that you are currently working on and check it for any signs of plagiarism. These may include:
   - ideas that you know are not your own, but which you have not attributed to the sources from which you took them
   - language that is clearly not your own. It is possible that, as you were making notes from a text, you copied out a whole sentence or paragraph, and then, when you began writing your assignment, you used these notes as they were, forgetting that you had copied them verbatim from the original text.
   - quotations that are not followed by a citation
2. Paraphrase the following passage, taking care not to change its original meaning:

Companies that don’t have a simple and clear statement of strategy are likely to fall into the category of those that have failed to execute their strategy or, worse, those that never even had one. In an astonishing number of organisations, executives, frontline employees and all those in between are frustrated because no clear strategy exists for the company or its lines of business. The kinds of complaints that abound in such firms include those to do with initiatives that have to be shut down because they do not fit the strategy, or with feedback on a seemingly viable market opportunity that is not forthcoming from top management.

Sometimes frustrations arise from top management insisting on bidding on a customer’s business when previous attempts have failed and it has been agreed that no further effort should be expended on trying to secure it.

Leaders of firms are mystified when what they thought was a beautifully crafted strategy is never implemented. They assume that the initiatives described in the voluminous documentation that emerges from an annual budget or a strategic-planning process will ensure competitive success. They fail to appreciate the necessity of having a simple, clear, succinct strategy statement that everyone can internalise and use as a guiding light for making difficult choices.

Source: Adapted from Collis & Rukstad (2008)

3. Summarise the following passage in no more than 300 words:

**When you think the strategy is wrong**

Strategy development is a difficult, time-intensive, and often messy process. The end result is never perfect. However, as a good citizen in any organization, you have an obligation to act if you see something wrong with your organization’s strategy. Linda Hill, the Wallace Brett Donham Professor of Business Administration at the Harvard Business School and author of *Becoming a Manager: How New Managers Master the Challenges of Leadership*, says, ‘Anyone with a deep commitment to the organization owes it to that organization to ask questions and clear up confusions.’ However, you need to proceed cautiously. Don Sull, Professor of Management Practice in Strategic and International Management, the Faculty Director of Executive Education at the London Business School, and author of *The Upside of Turbulence*, cautions, ‘Saying “this is stupid and wrong” isn’t helpful.’ Before you cry ‘wrong strategy’, follow these three steps to understand what is truly at stake and explore your motivations.
1) Diagnose: Understand the full picture

An organization’s strategy is often steeped in complex political issues. Before you speak up, try to understand the situation in which the strategy was developed. As Gary Neilson, a Senior Partner at Booz & Company and co-author of Results: Keep What’s Good, Fix What’s Wrong, and Unlock Great Performance, points out, ‘Too many people view themselves as a self appointed strategist for the company.’ Don’t assume you know how or why the strategy was developed. Use your network to find out more about the process and the assumptions used. According to Hill, a good network will return useful information and advice if it includes a diverse set of people who have differing perspectives – what Hill calls ‘a personal board of directors’. Send out feelers to get more background about what went into the strategy and what its intended purpose is. Try to understand what problem the company’s leaders are trying to solve with the current strategy or if there is a shift in priorities that you don’t know about. Gaining a perspective on what went into the strategy can help you to reflect on what is underlying your concerns.

2) Reflect: Contextualize your concerns

When it comes to strategy, right or wrong is in the eye of the beholder. Sull points out that a ‘good enough strategy excellently implemented will trump a perfect strategy lukewarmly implemented nine times out of ten’. Because no strategy is infallible, it’s likely that there are things you feel should be different, but these things don’t necessarily require you to cause a mutiny. Neilson urges that concerned employees ask themselves, ‘Is it that you would have expected a different direction or do you believe that the analysis, facts, or process that the company used [were] flawed?’ It’s your job to understand what about your unease is critical to raise and what is simply the result of a difference of opinion.

It’s also important to ask yourself if you are using your objections as a reason not to do something difficult. Sull says, ‘Middle managers may use imperfect strategy as an excuse not to take initiative.’ It may be that your unease is rooted in your resistance to change or resentment about not being included in the strategy development process. It’s better to know the true source of your concerns before speaking up. After you’ve done your research and reflected on your true motivations, if your concerns remain, it’s time to verbalize them.

3) Speak up: Proceed carefully

You should start by going to your direct manager to share your apprehensions. Your manager may or may not have been involved in the development of the strategy, but hopefully she will know more about the background. This is a conversation that should happen in private … Take an inquiry stance, asking questions and enlisting your manager’s help in understanding why this is the strategy the company has chosen.
You can use questions such as, ‘What are the assumptions behind the strategy?’, ‘Could you explain to me why this particular piece is important?’, or ‘What scope do we have to adjust the strategy to the realities of the local market?’

It is important when sharing your concerns that you provide data that supports why you’re raising questions in the first place. If you’ve done your research, you should have this information at the ready. You can make this conversation more successful by proposing alternative solutions that would help mitigate the risks you see. Be sure that you don’t accuse your manager or hold her responsible. You should make clear that you are not questioning her authority but trying to better understand the strategy you’ve been asked to implement.

Source: Adapted from Gallo, A. (2010)

References


Anti-plagiarism websites cited:
Grammarly: https://www.grammarly.com/plagiarism-checker
Plagiarisma: plagiarisma.net
PlagTracker: https://www.plagtracker.com
Turnitin: https://www.turnitin.com
The purpose of this chapter is to enable you to understand the function of writing paragraphs in academic assignments. Each new paragraph should contain a new idea that is then explained using evidence. Sentences within paragraphs and between paragraphs need to be connected logically.

After studying this chapter, students should be able to:
- understand paragraphs as clusters of meaning;
- write functional paragraphs;
- use appropriate linking words to connect ideas; and
- connect paragraphs logically.

6.1 Introduction

Writing well defined paragraphs is crucial to a good assignment. Paragraphs can be viewed as being rather like pieces of meat on a kebab skewer. They are all mutually dependent, but they are unique. They support each other, but they have their own character. Every paragraph needs to have its own salient point, and this will be different from any point made in the other paragraphs of an assignment. Each paragraph will address one aspect of the total answer to the question that has been set. In addition, each paragraph contributes to the main idea running through the assignment (rather like the kebab skewer).

Paragraphing is an essential characteristic of written English. It allows for a visual organisation of writing that makes for accessible reading. Paragraphs combine sentences that belong together and in so doing, encompass and contain certain pieces of information. The sentences within a paragraph mostly discuss one particular theme, whereas a new paragraph shows that a new topic or idea is being addressed. Paragraphs may be long or short, but the most important thing to keep in mind about paragraphs is that each new paragraph contains a new idea or point. It is imperative that paragraphs are sequenced correctly because they provide the building blocks of logical argument in the assignment. In the same way that bricks are placed one on top of each other to construct a building, your paragraphs should be presented in such a way that you gradually develop, explain and expand your argument. Many students mistakenly think that an academic essay is merely a description, but this is not always the case. Academic writing should be thought of as a combination of facts with supporting evidence which
cohere into a logical argument. Your paragraphs should form consecutive steps in the formation of that argument. A text that has been thought out has structured and organised paragraphs.

Paragraphs are important because they serve to:

- structure and reflect our thinking;
- help readers to follow the content of the argument; and
- break texts into manageable portions.

6.2 Definition of a paragraph

Each individual paragraph deals with just one theme/idea or point of argument in a piece of writing. Therefore, a paragraph is a unit of writing that comprises several sentences that focus on a single idea, theme, point or topic. An average paragraph contains approximately 50 to 200 words. Paragraphs may naturally be longer if you need to explain a topic in detail in a lengthier piece of writing. In journalism (e.g., newspapers), paragraphs are usually rather short. However in specialist writing (e.g., scientific reports) they may be relatively extended.

The principal thought or main idea of a paragraph is usually presented in what is referred to as a topic sentence. The purpose of this fundamental sentence is to state, sum up or clearly express the main theme or idea of the paragraph. The topic sentence therefore forms the basis of a clearly constructed paragraph. The topic sentence may appear anywhere in the paragraph. However, it is usually found at the beginning of the paragraph: the first sentence. The purpose of this is that the reader immediately knows what the main idea is. In a very long paragraph, the opening topic sentence may be reiterated or further emphasised in its conclusion.

In academic texts, a typical paragraph is very much like a miniature version of the structure of a complete assignment. A well structured paragraph often has the following suggested format:

- **Topic sentence** – this presents the main idea that will be discussed in the paragraph.
- **Supporting details** – this part of the paragraph includes details, facts, examples and/or quotes that support the main idea.
- **Conclusion sentence** – this sentence summarises the main idea of the paragraph. It may also connect to the topic or idea to be discussed the next paragraph.

Therefore, the features of a paragraph are:

- topic sentence/clear main idea;
- supporting sentences;
- logical sequence of supporting sentences;
coherence and unity; and
consistent style.

Starting a new paragraph is an indication to your reader that you are beginning a fresh thought or moving onto a new point. Because your outline will help you divide your assignment into sections, the subsequent paragraphs must match up with the logical sections in the assignment.

6.3 The topic sentence

The topic or subject of the paragraph should usually be made apparent in the first sentence. As a result, this sentence is usually referred to as the ‘topic sentence’. The topic sentence offers a valuable guide to both writer and reader of a text. If, for example, the text or assignment in which the topic sentence appears needs to present an argument, then the topic sentences indicate the central points of the argument. The topic sentence is usually a statement that serves to unify the content of the paragraph. This initial statement and extension should then be followed by evidence to support the argument being presented. The paragraph topic sentence can be realised in several ways; the following are examples (these guidelines are based on academic writing in general, and the standard practice of assignment writing in particular):

• It might state what to anticipate in the paragraph: ‘There are several factors that influence the behaviour of leaders in organisations.’
• It might be a statement that will then be supported by evidence: ‘The survey results indicate that insurance companies are failing their customers.’
• It might make a strong statement with conviction and then go on to explain: ‘Energised and charismatic leadership in organisations inspires loyalty as well as high levels of performance from employees.’

The topic sentence cannot be:

• an obvious factual statement (e.g., ‘Ottawa is the capital city of Canada.’; or
• a vague opinion or observation (e.g., ‘I think that banks in South Africa are overcharging.’).

When deciding on the topic sentence, consider the following issues:

• When you write the topic sentence of a paragraph you are required to think in depth about what exactly the focus of the paragraph is. In other words, you will have to have a very good idea about what the content of the paragraph is, before you are able to structure it well. This will help to avoid adding in irrelevant information and ensure that you include information that is focused and significant.
• When you have completed writing the entire paragraph, it is a good idea to go back to the topic sentence to see whether the topic of the paragraph has in fact been clearly reflected in the writing. If you have drifted in a different direction during the paragraph, you will be able to see this clearly and rectify it.

• The topic sentences will help you to check the logical flow of your assignment. A good way to see if your assignment is well constructed is to cut and paste the introduction onto a separate page, together with each of the topic sentences. When you look at your introduction and your topic sentences, there should be a clear, logical progression. You should be able to see the direction and development of your assignment. The focus of each paragraph should be obvious. If this is not the case, you will need to go back and reconsider the topic sentences, the wording of your paragraphs and perhaps the structure of your assignment.

• The topic sentence also guides readers and should enable them to follow your assignment easily. This is very important when you want a good mark! The topic sentences are rather like signposts leading the reader through the text.

Therefore, think of the topic sentence as a claim, or the point that will be established and confirmed in the paragraph. All the sentences that follow this topic sentence must therefore refer to it in some way. The sentences that come directly after the topic sentence should develop and expand on this main claim or point, explaining and relating its relevance to the subject being discussed. You could provide explanatory examples, which can then be discussed as a description of the main point. The last sentence of a paragraph should aim to sum up your thoughts about the topic in some way. It may also contain a statement linking it to the next paragraph.
6.4 Organising a paragraph

**Tip**

Think of the topic sentence as the roof of a house. As you are writing, ask yourself this question: what holds up the roof? The answer is that the walls support the roof. The walls represent the information or evidence or proof that supports the topic sentence or main idea or argument of the paragraph.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic sentence</th>
<th>Supporting details</th>
<th>Concluding sentence</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

Figure 6.1 illustrates the basic structure of a paragraph.

*These supporting elements include:*  
- examples;  
- reasons;  
- explanations;  
- illustrations;  
- elaborations;  
- statistics; and  
- references and quotes.

Figure 6.2: A paragraph is like a house
Chapter 6: Writing Paragraphs

Exercise: Making it simple

The following is a simple exercise to help you construct a complete paragraph:

- Write the numbers 1–5 on a piece of paper.
- Next to number 1, write a statement, in a complete sentence. For example, if you are asked to write a paragraph about the business person you most admire, you might write, ‘The business person I most admire is Richard Branson.’
- Next to number 2, write one reason in support of your statement. You might write, ‘He is the embodiment of entrepreneurship and he is continuously seeking new business opportunities.’
- Next to number 3, write another reason in support of your statement. You might write, ‘His internationally recognised brand, Virgin, spans everything from credit cards to airlines to music shops.’
- Next to number 4, write a third reason in support of your statement. You might write, ‘Branson seems to have boundless energy, is passionate about life and engages in high-adrenalin adventures.’
- Next to number 5, rephrase your statement. You may write, ‘Although he has yet to circumnavigate the world in a hot-air balloon, business-wise there is no stopping Branson.’

You then have the following paragraph:

The business person I most admire is Richard Branson. He is the embodiment of entrepreneurship and is continuously seeking new business opportunities. His internationally recognised brand, Virgin, spans everything from credit cards to airlines to music shops. Branson seems to have boundless energy, is passionate about life and engages in high-adrenalin adventures. Although he has yet to circumnavigate the world in a hot-air balloon, business-wise there is no stopping Branson.

Exercise: Comparing paragraphs

Consider the following example:

To achieve maximum success and productivity in the workplace, it is very important that we understand how we use our time at work [topic sentence]. The essential thing is to exercise self-management as well as self-control, and not let time control us [reason 1]. The problem is that people are easily distracted and have trouble prioritising [reason 2]. Research has shown that although people create ‘to do’ lists, they still waste time [reason 3].
A solution to managing time at work could be learning to delegate tasks and to work effectively in teams [reason 4]. We all need to help one another deal with the pressures of managing time for better efficiency in the workplace [a concluding statement that is rephrased to sum up the topic sentence].

Now consider a second example:

Successful entrepreneurs may often have an extremely positive and even arrogant view of themselves, coupled with strong and assertive personalities [topic sentence]. They are focused and determined to achieve their objectives, and believe completely in their ability to attain them [reason/expansion 1]. Their self-assurance can frequently be regarded by other people as flashiness or egotism, but they are just too focused to worry about negative habitual criticism [reason/expansion 2]. Almost all entrepreneurs have a fervent will to do things more effectively, and to develop their products or service. They are continually looking for ways to progress or evolve. They are inventively pioneering and practical [reason/expansion 3]. If something is not successful or yielding results, they simply move on or adapt. [reason/expansion 4]. Entrepreneurs understand the importance of being the best in their industry, and know that the only way to become number one is to keep up with trends. They are up to date with the latest technology or service knowledge, and are always prepared to adjust if they see new prospects arising. [concluding statement that is rephrased to sum up the topic sentence].

In both of these paragraphs, you can see how the topic sentence has been supported, and expanded upon, by the explanation sentences that follow it. Try this simple technique with more complex and advanced statements.

**Tip**

It may help to brainstorm before you start writing. On a piece of paper, jot down as many ideas as you can think of, or research, to support your statement. You may then select the most important or most relevant of these statements.

### 6.5 Revising a paragraph

Revising your writing, after you have written a first draft, is an important and integral part of academic writing. When revising and rewriting paragraphs, keep the following questions in mind. These will enable you to make changes more effectively:

- What is the main idea/point of this paragraph?
- Is the topic sentence clear?
- Does every sentence that I have included relate to the main idea/topic sentence?
• How many supporting sentences have I included?
• Do I need any more specific explanations?
• Are there any additional facts/statistics/examples that I could add to make my supporting ideas clearer?
• Is there anything I need to define more clearly in order to illustrate what I mean?

6.6 Linking words

Linking words are important to ensure that your writing reads naturally and clearly. They serve to provide a continuous flow and organisation to writing. They help you to link ideas and sentences, so that your reader can follow your thinking. Linking words may be used to connect sentences to one another within paragraphs and to connect paragraphs to each other. The latter can take two forms: ending a paragraph with a sentence that links onto the next paragraph, or starting the new paragraph in a way that connects back to the previous paragraph.

Linking words provide a text with cohesion, and illustrate how the parts of the text relate to each other. Linking words have the following functions:
• they add further information to the main point;
• they contrast concepts or notions;
• they express cause and effect.
• they show exactly when something occurred (narration);
• they express purpose (why?) and opinion;
• they list examples;
• they make conclusions; and
• they provide emphasis.

Linking words, also referred to as signposts, are found in good academic writing. Their function is to help the reader to understand the writing more easily. They help to link what has already been said with what is about to be discussed. In other words, linking words act as road signs to the reader – they tell the reader where the argument is going, and refer back to the argument that has been made. In this way, linking words allow the reader to follow the thoughts of the writer just as you would follow the road signs on a journey.

In academic writing, linking words and phrases provide vital signposts. In a longer assignment, it is not sufficient simply to outline the intended assignment structure in the introduction: you also need signposts or links throughout the assignment to guide and direct the reader. Signposts can either show the order in which ideas are presented or they can indicate the transition from one section of thought in your writing to another.
Linking words thus enable a writer to develop an argument in an assignment. It is up to the writer to devise the most effective way to present an argument in a text. You may think that short sentences are better to use because they are easier to read. However, in reality too many short sentences can be just as problematic to follow as too many long ones. The most effective approach is to combine long and short sentences. Several approaches will be outlined here, although the methods may overlap to some extent.

The paragraph may indicate a comparison and/or contrast between two dissimilar things. In everyday life, we often compare and contrast things and events – for example, the price of cars, national levels of debt in various countries or patterns of rainfall. Comparing and contrasting are also common and useful ways of organising academic writing. You may, for instance, be required to compare different theories or case studies.

The first key to writing successful comparison-and-contrast assignments or paragraphs is mastering the appropriate use of structure words to convey comparison and contrast. These are words that introduce points of comparison and points of contrast. Table 6.1 lists some of the words and phrases used to discuss similarities and differences.

**Table 6.1: Linking words and phrases to express similarity and difference**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Expressing similarity</th>
<th>Expressing difference</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>likewise</td>
<td>instead</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>similarly</td>
<td>on the contrary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>also</td>
<td>by (way of) contrast</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>too</td>
<td>in contrast/comparison</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>just as</td>
<td>on the one hand … on the other hand</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>the same (as)</td>
<td>however</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>similar to</td>
<td>although/even though</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>not only … but also</td>
<td>whereas/while</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>but</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>despite/in spite of</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>nevertheless/nonetheless</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>conversely</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>as opposed to</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Your paragraph might take the form of an extended definition. In this instance, you would have to use linking words that provide addition, elaboration and example. Tables 6.2, 6.3 and 6.4 list examples of each.

**Table 6.2: Linking words and phrases to express addition**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>also</th>
<th>moreover</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>and</td>
<td>so too</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>besides</td>
<td>in addition</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Chapter 6: Writing Paragraphs

Your paragraph may take the form of a cause-and-effect analysis. In this instance, you would have to use linking words that provide the notion of consequence and result. Table 6.5 provides examples.

Table 6.5: Linking words and phrases to express cause and effect

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>accordingly</th>
<th>since</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>as a result</td>
<td>so</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>consequently</td>
<td>then</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>hence</td>
<td>therefore</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>it follows, then</td>
<td>thus</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Your paragraph may take the form of connecting sentences in sequence or to show time (see Table 6.6 for examples).

Table 6.6: Linking words and phrases to express sequence

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>firstly</th>
<th>still</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>secondly</td>
<td>then</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>thirdly</td>
<td>next</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>another</td>
<td>further</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>finally</td>
<td>as long as</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>earlier</td>
<td>formerly</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Academic Literacy

| immediately | meanwhile |
| subseqently | thereafter |

Your paragraph may take the form of connecting elements of equal importance (see Table 6.7).

Table 6.7: Linking words to express equal importance

| and       | for       |
| but       | yet       |
| so        | or        |

Linking words may also be used to connect elements of unequal importance (see Table 6.8).

Table 6.8: Linking words to express unequal importance

| when      | wherever  |
| while     | if        |
| before    | unless    |
| after     | whereas   |
| whenever  | as        |

The sentences in your paragraph may need linking words to show relationships between or among the elements of the sentences (see Table 6.9). These are called prepositions.

Table 6.9: Linking words and phrases to express relationships

| during    | in spite of |
| after     | for         |
| before    | since       |
| in, on, at| by          |
| despite   | between     |
| about to  | among       |
| from      | with        |
| within    | beside      |
| without   | near        |
| next to   |             |
When you formulate the concluding paragraph of an assignment, you could use these linking words to signal that you are indeed concluding (see Table 6.10).

**Table 6.10: Linking words and phrases used to sum up**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>in summary</th>
<th>thus it may be seen that</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>in conclusion</td>
<td>on the whole</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>in short</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

When you write, you may want to refer back to a point already mentioned or an issue already raised. Examples of such phrases that look backwards are:

- This suggestion …
- These ideas …
- This brief outline suggests …
- Such proposals …

Similarly, linking words can signal ahead to issues that will be raised in the next section or to some point to be made in the near future:

- In this section, I will …
- The next section will show …
- My next chapter will consider why …
- A recent study suggests …
- One important recent finding indicates that …
- Despite these reports, other writers have proposed …
- In spite of these findings, teachers believe … (some signposts look in both directions at the same time)
- I will therefore now consider …
- Issues related to this will now be considered with a view to …
- This view has been rejected by some authors, who claim that …
- In contrast, a recent article …

Try to avoid where possible starting a sentence with words such as ‘and’, ‘but’, ‘because’, ‘also’ and ‘in fact’. The reason is that these linking words are used to join two independent clauses together and create a relationship between them. Your aim is to learn how to use independent clauses for expressing your argument and thoughts. Independent clauses can stand by themselves as isolated sentences. When they do stand by themselves, apart from other clauses, they are generally referred to simply as sentences, and not clauses. It is important for accurate writing to be able to identify a clause and to know when a clause can stand on its own. This is particularly important to help avoid incomplete or fragmented sentences.
A clause is different to a phrase, which is a group of interrelated words that does not contain a subject–verb relationship, such as ‘in the evening’ or ‘running down the street’ or ‘beyond the river’.

Dependent clauses cannot stand alone and make good sense. They must be integrated with an independent clause, so that they become part of a sentence that can stand by itself. The function of linking words is to join two ideas or thoughts that are of more or less equal importance. Therefore, if you start a sentence with a linking word (like ‘and’), it appears that you are actually presenting only one half of a more complex sentence.

**Tip**

*Now that you are aware of the various types of linking words, look out for them while you are reading. Take note of how they function to make a text read coherently. Ask yourself if the linking words have helped guide you through the text. Be aware of how the linking words shape the argument of the text.*

Identify linking words and how they guide you through the example text below.

Getting away from controlling bosses, and having the opportunity to make your own decisions, is one of the attractions of starting your own business. However, as alluring as it seems, not everyone is cut out for self-employment. Therefore, before you initiate any plan to start a business it is important to take a searching look at yourself and ask yourself some vital questions. In addition, make sure that you have enough reserves available and start marketing before taking the leap. Furthermore, don’t expect to be rich in the initial stages of beginning your business. As a result, you will need to set aside enough money to provide for you and your family for the first few months of your new business. Consequently, it is suggested that you refer to other comparable businesses and find out how long it took them to become sustainable.

Managers and team leaders may have decidedly different management styles. Some leaders are poor time managers, and meetings, for example, may be long and rambling, and rarely end on time. This type of manager finds it difficult to stick to a schedule, whereas other types of managers are intolerant of delays.

Furthermore, meetings may often end without closure. Some team leaders, on the other hand, make an effort to start, and stop, a meeting on time, and to end a meeting with decisions and action plans. Another difference between leaders involves documentation. Some managers rely on documentation. As a result, they have a procedure manual for everything. Others, in contrast, think this is unnecessary. In addition, some managers prefer individuals to work alone, whereas others may prefer teamwork.
CONCLUSION

Structuring your writing clearly in paragraphs with designated topic sentences and supporting evidence allows you and your reader to make sense of your thoughts. Using linking words strengthens your logic and argument. The reader is guided through your writing with ease by following the linking words. If you use these devices you will remain in control of your own writing and be able to get your argument across.

Tip

There is a danger of using too many linking words in an assignment. You need to use linking words economically and sensibly. For example, if you use the linking word ‘first’, you need to follow it up with ‘second’. If you use the linking word ‘however’, you need to be sure that it is because you are indicating something other than what has been proposed. This is why it is important to understand the meaning of each linking word to see that it fits appropriately into the sentences and paragraphs you write.

Exercises

1. Fill in the missing linking words.

Being an intrinsically motivated person is the main personality trait that differentiates an employee from an entrepreneur. ______ if you need to wait around, to be told what to do, then you would find it easier to be employed in an organization rather than to start your own business. ______, if you are able to think of an idea and develop it with creativity and initiative, carry it out without prodding from someone else, then you may be able to succeed in your own business. ______ when you work for someone else you are contracted to work certain hours. ______, at the end of the day, you are often able to just forget about the job, go home and relax. ______ when you have your own business you tend to shoulder a lot of responsibility and you will often end up working longer hours than a average salaried employee. ______ if you enjoy what you are doing and if your business is financially stable, then you may not even notice you have put in a lot of extra hours when other people are relaxing ______ ______, there is no ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ here. It is just a question of looking deeply at yourself and finding out what best suits your individual needs.
2. Rewrite the following paragraph: first identify the topic sentence and then put the supporting sentences into the correct sequence.

a. The government also makes transfers to households and business, in the form of pensions, other income support, interest on public debt and subsidies.

b. This spending, like investment spending, represents an injection into the income stream, because it does not, once again like investment spending, originate in household budgets.

c. The government at all levels (national, provincial and local) spends a great deal of money annually.

d. Since such payments are income transfers, without any direct returns, they are by nature an injection, and in the circular flow are seen as positive stimuli.

3. Identify the topic sentence and put the supporting sentences into the correct sequence. Where could this paragraph be divided into two?

a. However, the social implication of unemployment is that it is a central consideration in easing poverty.

b. One way of achieving this aim is through rigorous economic growth, which promotes a constantly growing labour market.

c. With a significant level of unemployment, it will be difficult to lessen poverty and unfairness in the long run.

d. The distinguishing aim of economic policy is to improve the quantifiable well-being and the quality of life of the citizens of a country.

e. When the labour market does not absorb the emerging labour force, individuals who are unable or unwilling to work at the current wage rate may lose their jobs.

f. A high level of joblessness has economic and social ramifications.

g. From an economic perspective, the unemployment rate in a country remains one of the key ways in which economic performance can be measured.

h. Another characteristic of the South African situation is the relatively higher occurrence of unemployment among women, the young and inexperienced workers.
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References


Much of the work done in higher education is assessed through written work in the form of essays, reports and other assignments. Therefore, it is important that you develop appropriate strategies to make the most of the assessment opportunities available to you. After all, these written assignments are the main channel of communication between you and your lecturer. The main purpose of this chapter is to help you develop your academic writing skills in extended assignments.

After studying this chapter, students should be able to:
- analyse an assignment question to show understanding of the demands of a task;
- investigate a topic;
- plan an assignment by means of a mind map or outline;
- write a draft of the assignment;
- write an appropriate introduction and conclusion;
- present the assignment in the required format (essay, scientific report, poster, and so on);
- revise the assignment draft using a checklist;
- edit the assignment draft using a checklist; and
- use the Harvard system of referencing.

7.1 Introduction

In high school, you may have received back from your teacher a marked essay with comments such as ‘you have not answered the question’ or ‘you have answered the question only partially’ or ‘your assignment lacks depth’ – or similar. The main reason for such comments is students’ failure to unpack the essay or assignment question carefully enough to establish what its demands were. In this chapter, you will learn how to approach written assignments methodically, from analysing the question, planning and writing the first draft, through to the final product.

Although the next section focuses on academic essay writing, the process approach presented is applicable to all other types of assignments, such as technical, scientific or research reports, and posters.
7.2 The process approach to academic essay writing

Your attitude to an assignment determines the approach that you apply when writing it. If you believe that you do not need to draft and redraft the assignment before handing it in, and that you can gather all the information you need and write a first-class piece of work in one sitting, then you are adopting what is called a product approach to your writing. If this is the case, your focus is on completing the assignment in as little time as possible without being overly concerned about its quality.

If, on the other hand, you take a process approach to your writing, you will accept that, to produce a good piece of writing, you will need to plan each stage and be prepared to move forwards and backwards between the steps until you are satisfied with the final product. With the product approach, writing is seen as a linear process, going from point A to point B with no stops in between. With the process approach, it is seen as circular and consisting of several interrelated stages, between which you move forwards and backwards as the need arises, until you are satisfied with the final quality of your assignment. Figure 7.1 presents these stages diagrammatically, so that you can see the interrelationships among them.
The following sections look at these steps in turn.

7.2.1 Analysing the essay question
An essay question consists of the following parts, which you should identify before you even begin attempting to answer it:

- the keywords;
- the instruction word or words;
- limitations; and
- special conditions (if any).

Let us suppose that you have been assigned the following question: ‘In an essay of not more than 2 000 words, discuss how you would introduce a new, highly technical gadget to the residents of an informal settlement on the outskirts of Johannesburg.’

In this question, the word that tells you how you should tackle this question – in other words, the instruction word – is ‘discuss’. When you discuss a topic, you need to look at all its sides, taking into account the nature of the content as well as the context of the discussion. In this case, the focus is ‘how you would introduce a new, highly technical gadget’. In your essay, your discussion would have to focus on the fact that this product is not only new, but also highly technical, and on what the implications might therefore be for your target market.

The target market, or context, is ‘an informal settlement on the outskirts of Johannesburg’. As with the content, you would have to consider the nature of informal settlements and how this setting might affect your intended customers’ reaction to your product, and what tactics you would have to employ to secure sales. A special condition has been imposed on this question: ‘in not more than 2 000 words’. It is important to take note of this condition, because it means that the lecturer has estimated that you need to write a certain number of words to answer the question to his or her satisfaction. If your essay is much shorter than this, the reason might be that you have answered the question only partially; if it is much longer, you may well have included irrelevant information, which would influence the mark you receive and lower the quality of your work.

Commonly used instruction words and their meanings
You must be able to interpret the meaning of assignment instruction words accurately so that you respond appropriately to assignment questions. However, you also have to understand the intent behind each word, which you can do by classifying them according to the six categories of Bloom’s Taxonomy of Cognitive Objectives. This is a classification system used in educational contexts to define and distinguish between the different levels at which humans think, learn
and understand. As the term ‘cognitive objectives’ suggests, the instruction word indicates the level of thinking required by the task at hand, from the simplest, most basic processes, such as remembering, to more complex ones, such as re-interpretation and combining information from different sources to provide new insights into a topic by creating new knowledge.

In Table 7.1, the instruction words have been classified (in the first column) according to Bloom’s Taxonomy. This list is by no means exhaustive: it serves merely as a starting point from which you can develop your own glossary by adding new words as you come across them in your field of study.

Table 7.1: Commonly used instruction words

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CATEGORY</th>
<th>INSTRUCTION WORD</th>
<th>WHAT IS REQUIRED</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Remembering</td>
<td>1. Define;</td>
<td>1. State clearly what something is and what it is like. 2. Write your answer in</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2. List;</td>
<td>point form. 3. Tell the story in a clear sequence or demonstrate how things</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3. Relate</td>
<td>are connected to each other.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Understanding</td>
<td>1. Compare;</td>
<td>1. Focus on the similarities between two or more objects, ideas, events or</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2. Contrast;</td>
<td>theories (NB: sometimes this word is used to refer to both similarities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3. Define;</td>
<td>and differences). 2. Focus on the differences between two or more objects,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4. Describe;</td>
<td>ideas, events or theories. 3. State clearly what something is and what it is</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5. Explain;</td>
<td>like. 4. Give a detailed account of the characteristics and qualities of a thing.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>6. Illustrate;</td>
<td>5. Give a detailed account and illustrate your answer with examples. 6. Respond</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>7. Interpret;</td>
<td>to a topic by using examples, diagrams, statistics, and so on, to support your</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>8. Outline;</td>
<td>argument. 7. Present the meaning of a text, graph, image, and so on, in your</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>9. Summarise</td>
<td>own words, using examples where appropriate. 8. Present the answer in the form</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Applying</td>
<td>Apply</td>
<td>of main points only. 9. Outline the main points.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Solve problems by applying acquired knowledge, facts, techniques and rules in a different way.
### Analyse; Examine

1. Focus on the ‘how’ and ‘why’ of an issue or topic. Do not simply describe or summarise. Break it down into its component parts and examine each part in detail.
2. Examine a subject critically, analysing and commenting on the main points.

### Assess/critically assess; Criticise; Evaluate

1. Decide on the value or significance of something after considering its ‘positive’ and ‘negative’ features.
2. Assess the merit of something by considering both good and bad points and then draw a conclusion from your analysis. (NB: this has nothing to do with fault-finding).
3. Similar to ‘assess’.

### Compose/construct/create

Compile information from different sources in different ways by combining elements into new patterns or by proposing alternative solutions, thus creating new knowledge.

---

When you have unpacked the question, and established the meaning and intent of the instruction word/s, as well as the keywords and the limitations on coverage, you must try to rephrase it in your own words to test your understanding of its demands. For example, the essay question example given above might be rewritten thus: ‘The question requires me to give details of how I would get shack dwellers living in an area near Johannesburg to be interested in, and possibly to adopt for use, a complicated mechanical or electronic device.’

Interpreting the question in this manner helps you focus on the key terms ‘introduce’ and ‘highly technical gadget’, as well as the limitation that the market targeted by your enterprise should be people living in an informal settlement just outside Johannesburg, and nowhere else. Once you have assimilated these conditions, you will be unlikely to include irrelevant information or write off the topic.

### 7.2.2 Brainstorming and pre-writing

We normally associate brainstorming with working in a group, whereby each member of the group contributes his or her own thoughts on a particular subject. However, it is also possible to brainstorm a topic on your own. You do this by writing down anything and everything that you know about the topic. Do not concern yourself with writing in complete or grammatical sentences – the idea is simply to include everything that you know already, whether it is relevant to the question that you are answering or not. There will be time, at the revision stage...
(discussed later in this chapter), to remove irrelevant information. You need to brainstorm in this manner to find out:

• what you already know about the topic; and
• what gaps need to be filled.

7.2.3 Drawing up an initial plan
When you have exhausted what you know, you should try to organise your notes by making either a mind map or a tree diagram. As you assign points to various parts of the mind map or tree diagram, gaps will begin to emerge. These will suggest to you where your search for information should begin. The part of the map or diagram with the least amount of information is the most obvious starting point.

7.2.4 Reading around the topic
Once you have an idea of the demands of the assignment, you are ready to proceed to the next step in the process: reading relevant sources in order to gather the information that you need. Your main sources will be:

• your lectures or lecture materials;
• your textbooks;
• the reading list provided by the lecturer (if there is one);
• the library, for more books and journal articles (it is important to note that journal articles might contain more up-to-date information than books; it can take up to two years for a book to be published, whereas journals are issued at regular intervals); and
• the Internet.

The last source in this list deserves special attention, as you might not be familiar with using the Internet to find information for assignments. The Internet is a readily available, up-to-date tool for accessing information on a wide range of subjects using software systems called search engines. Guided by clues provided by you, a search engine conducts a search of the websites on its database and displays the results that seem to meet your criteria, starting with those that are most likely to meet your needs. Your choice of search engine determines to a large extent the dependability of the information that you find. Google Scholar and Google Books are two of the more reliable ones for scholarly searches:

• **Google Scholar**: This is a freely accessible search engine that gives you access to a wide range of scholarly articles. Full articles may be available in pdf format, which can be downloaded to your device but, where they are either not available or can be accessed only on payment of a fee or through your library, the search engine gives you sufficient information to decide whether or not to pursue your search further.
• **Google Books**: This search engine has the following:
  • complete copies of books, which, with the permission of publishers, have been scanned by Google for ‘full view’ and which can be downloaded for free; although there are millions of these books, they represent only a percentage of published books, for the obvious reason that publishing companies would go out of business if all their books were available free of charge;
  • a limited number of pages from some books for preview purposes;
  • two or three lines of text based on the keywords typed in by a searcher, designed to give a ‘snippet view’ of the contents of the book; and
  • abbreviated information, such as the title of the book, the author, the publisher, and so on, which is enough to inform you that the book exists but does not allow much else – an indication that permission has not been granted to Google Books to scan the book.

Other commonly used search engines are Google, Yahoo and Ask. Because you probably google words several times each day, you might be wondering why Google has not been included among those search engines described as dependable above. There is a simple reason for this exclusion: there are few, if any, restrictions on the content of its database, unlike that of Google Scholar, which, as its name suggests, is designed to accommodate content of a scholarly nature.

For most basic searches, you need to go to a web browser, such as Google Chrome or Internet Explorer, on your device and type in the name of the search engine in the address bar at the top of the page (see Figure 7.2). You will be directed to a web page displaying various resources related to that search engine.

If your choice is Google Scholar, for example, you must then click on a resource with this heading. This will take you to the search engine’s web page.

Typing in the search bar a few key words relating to your topic, such as ‘avoiding plagiarism’, as in Figure 7.3, leads you to the titles of a wide range of resources. If you select one of these titles and click on it, you will be taken directly to the resource itself (which might consist of brief information on the article, including the full title, author and an abstract, or the full article in the form of a pdf file). You can then browse through it to establish whether or not it is relevant to your assignment. It is important to check out the web address at the top of the web page, called a uniform resource locator (or URL for short), for information on the origin of that resource. Look out for abbreviations such as ‘.edu’, ‘.gov’ and ‘.ac’ in the web address (for resources from educational, government and academic institutions, respectively), which indicate that it should contain information that is likely to be relatively reliable and unbiased.
However, this is not to say that other URLs are not to be trusted: it simply means that you have to exercise extreme caution because the Internet is open to all users and a lot of what your search unearths might not be all that useful to you. In fact, if you are not careful, you can be easily led to incorrect or misleading information, a fact that you may not realise because the printed word wields a great deal of influence on our psyche in terms of what we perceive to be truthful or reliable. Google Scholar is less likely to lead you to unreliable information, although it has
its own shortcomings, including the fact that it may not give you access to certain sources of academic information, such as some important academic journals. To get access to these, you might need to extend your search to what are called databases. If your research using search engines does not deliver the expected results, you should use the services of the subject librarians at your institution. Subject librarians are professionals who are specially trained to provide you with the kind of support you need to locate the most relevant, up-to-date information in your discipline/s, using the most reliable search tools.

Generally, however, you must exercise caution when you use the Internet as a source of information. Because information on the Internet is presented in print and is easily accessible, the temptation to simply copy and paste material directly into your assignment can be almost irresistible at times. You may even think that this is an acceptable practice because at high school your teachers were more focused on encouraging you to find, rather than create content for your projects. At university, however, where there is a shift from knowledge reproduction to knowledge creation, you are expected to avoid such blatant plagiarism (refer to Chapter 5 for hints on how to avoid plagiarism).

When you begin your search for information for your assignment, be systematic. Let us say that you are reading and making notes in the library or from an electronic source. Begin by carefully taking down the bibliographic details relating to each source. The most important of these are:

- the author(s);
- the title of the work (include the subtitle if there is one);
- the date of publication;
- the publisher (or publishing organisation);
- the place of publication; and
- the URL details of any electronic sources used, as well as the dates of access.

Only when you have noted this information should you begin reading the text. Otherwise, when you come to writing the essay, you might end up having to discard some notes because you cannot remember their source. If you cannot remember the source, you cannot cite it in your essay. Not citing your source amounts to plagiarism (for more on how to cite, see Section 7.3, and refer to Chapter 5 for a discussion on plagiarism). When you have located the information that you want, begin reading. Remember to read actively, so that you understand the text. (Refer to Chapter 3 to remind yourself what is involved in reading actively, and to Chapter 5 for effective ways of summarising and paraphrasing.)
7.2.5 Planning and writing the first draft

Once you have gathered the information you need to write your assignment, the next step is to plan the essay using this information. Use either a mind map or an outline to group similar information into a recognisable shape. When making outline notes, you organise the main points into a numbered list and, below each one, indent and write down the key sub-points. This arrangement makes it easy for you to distinguish the main points from the major supporting details.

Begin by deciding which main points will make up your essay, and devise a means of identifying them. You might want to number them 1, 2, 3, and so on, and then go through your notes applying the same numbering system, so that all the pieces of information that go with main point 1 are identified by that number. This is what is called synthesis. When this has been done, you are ready to draw your mind map or to write your outline.

Use this mind map or outline to write your first draft. As far as possible, the first draft should be written in one sitting. Focus on higher-order skills, such as ensuring that:

- the content is relevant to the question;
- it is organised in a logical manner; and
- your tone is appropriate for your audience.

Your first draft should include any information from your notes that seems relevant to the question. Concentrate on writing as much as you can; let ideas flow freely without interruption, and without allowing yourself to worry about correct grammar, spelling, punctuation, and the like. That will come later, during the revision stage.

7.2.6 Writing an introduction

Strange as it may seem, it is only after you have written your first draft that you can write an appropriate introduction and conclusion. The reason is that, in an academic essay, your introduction should make clear to the reader what is contained in the body of the essay. You also need to indicate somewhere in the introduction how your essay is organised, so that anyone reading it starts off with a clear idea of the main points you make and the order in which you have tackled them.

What goes into the introduction is determined by the nature of the assignment. In the case of an essay that presents an argument, for example, you would structure it so that it has the following parts:

1. general background information on the topic;
2. an indication of the most widely accepted argument for and against the topic;
3. your own viewpoint in one sentence (called the thesis statement);
4. a brief reference to the main points that you raise in support of your viewpoint; and
5. a brief description of how you have structured your essay.

Let us say that you were assigned the following topic for an essay assignment: ‘Setting up in business in an informal settlement poses more challenges than doing so in a well-established township.’

Here is an example of a typical introduction, which attempts to include all the parts listed above (the underlining indicates the thesis statement):

When a person is planning to set up a business of any kind, location is a major consideration, which can determine the success or failure of the new business (1). An informal settlement might at first appear to be an ideal site for a new business venture, as there is likely to be less competition there than in a well-established township (2). However, the reality is that, although there may be few businesses operating in an informal settlement, it is much more difficult to run a successful business in such places (3). Success cannot be guaranteed because of the many challenges that have to be overcome, including the generally low standards of living and the probable high rates of crime (4). These and other negative factors are discussed in this essay, which also considers possible advantages before concluding that these are outweighed by the disadvantages (5).

The purpose of such an introduction is to show that there are two sides to the question, and what your own viewpoint is. You also want to give the reader an indication of the main points that you will include in your essay to support this viewpoint.

Sometimes it is necessary to include definitions in your introduction. For example, not all of your readers may be familiar with the term ‘informal settlement’. To ensure that, from the outset, it is clear what you are writing about, you would need to include, between sentences (2) and (3) above, a definition of the term, such as: ‘The term “informal settlement” is used to refer to the kind of settlement in which people simply move into a vacant piece of land and erect unplanned dwellings using any materials that they can find.’

### 7.2.7 Writing a conclusion

Writing the conclusion is also governed by a set of widely accepted conventions. These include:

- a transitional device or statement signalling to the reader that you are now bringing your argument to a conclusion;
• a brief reference to the thesis statement;
• an indication of how you have demonstrated that your viewpoint has merit; and
• a call for action or for further investigation of the issues raised in your essay.

Your conclusion should bring the discussion to a close systematically, so that the reader is not left wondering what it is you have written about.

7.2.8 Revising the first draft

With the introduction, the body and the conclusion in place, you are now ready to revise your first draft. Do not confuse revising with editing, which is dealt with in the next section. When you revise, you make sure that you have presented the information in as logical a manner as possible. In other words, you focus on the organisation of the essay. You might find that a paragraph, or a whole section, needs to be moved to another part of the essay, so that your ideas flow more smoothly.

It is also possible at this point to find that you have either included irrelevant information, which must be cut out, or that a particular point has not been discussed sufficiently, and that you need to read further to fill in the gaps in your discussion. There is no limit to the number of drafts that you should put your essay through: you will know that it is ready when you can read through the essay without feeling that a section is out of place, does not make sense or is irrelevant. Use the checklist at the end of this chapter to ensure that you have revised your draft essay as effectively as possible (see Section 7.4).

7.2.9 Editing the assignment

Editing your draft essay should begin only when you are satisfied that you have revised it fully and are satisfied with the shape that it has taken. Edit by paying close attention to surface-level features of your writing. Review and edit sentences for grammar, spelling, punctuation, readability, and so on. Often, it is difficult to recognise your own mistakes - hence the need for you either to put away the essay for a few days after you finish writing and then read it as if it were someone else's work, or, better still, give it to a friend to edit it for you. (Refer to the checklist at the end of this chapter.)

7.2.10 A word about report writing

The process approach to essay writing should also be applied to report writing. However, it should be noted that a technical or scientific report differs significantly from an essay in terms of structure. Table 7.2 presents what might be considered the main parts of a standard technical report. When writing reports, it is important that you conform to the report structures prescribed by your department or lecturers.
Table 7.2: Standard structure of a technical report

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SECTION</th>
<th>DETAILS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Title page</td>
<td>must include the title of the report in addition to information about its author</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summary</td>
<td>a brief summary covering the report’s most important features, as well as the most significant results and conclusions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contents page</td>
<td>numbers and lists all section and subsection headings with page numbers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>states the objectives of the report and indicates the way the topic of the report will be approached</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Body</td>
<td>main body text divided into headed sections (which are sometimes numbered) separating the main ideas, which must relate to each other in a logical order</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>provides a short summary of the main sections of the body, ensuring that all loose ends are tied up</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>References</td>
<td>contains details of all published sources of material referred to in the report</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledgements</td>
<td>a list of the names of people (and organisations) who contributed significantly to the successful compilation of the report</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendices (if any)</td>
<td>any additional material necessary for a full understanding of the report, including diagrams, raw data, and so on, mainly for the benefit of a specific audience, e.g. the assessor</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Technical reports often make use of various kinds of graphical, diagrammatic, tabular or statistical formats, which present information more clearly and concisely than words. It is important to observe the conventions of these formats in compliance with the dictates of departments or disciplines.

7.3 How to cite your sources

What is meant by citing your sources? When writing an academic assignment, you have to read as widely as you can around the topic and then use and draw from this information to put your assignment together. As you do this, you have to indicate where you found these ideas. This is called citing the sources of your information. There are many types of referencing systems and conventions. It is beyond the scope of this book to cover them all, but, for example, this book uses a Harvard referencing system (also known as the author-date system). With the Harvard system, you cite your sources within the text by giving the author’s surname and the year of publication (various examples of how this is done are given later in this section), and list the sources alphabetically by surname in a reference list at the end of the assignment. (How to compile a reference list is discussed in Section 7.3.2.)
Why is it necessary to cite your sources? You do this mainly for the following reasons:

- to show that the ideas that you are using have been borrowed from someone else; in other words, they are not your original ideas;
- to position your argument or ideas within a particular discourse;
- to demonstrate to the reader that you have read widely and are knowledgeable about the topic, and that your ideas are consonant with those of other writers within a particular discourse; and
- to make it easy for readers to locate these sources for their own use – either to verify what you say in your assignment, or to use for the purposes of their research and information.

Failure to cite your sources will result in what is known as plagiarism in academic circles. Plagiarism is a form of theft, except that, instead of stealing a physical object, you steal other people's ideas or concepts - known as intellectual property. Learning how to cite your sources properly will help you avoid committing this offence. (Chapter 5 covers plagiarism in more detail.)

7.3.1 Citing your sources within the text

In this section, we will look at some examples of how to cite sources within a text.

**One author's name**, forming part of the sentence:


2. The view that making assumptions about living conditions in informal settlements is unwise is amply demonstrated by the experiences described by Brown (2009, p. 17).

3. According to Brown (2009, p. 17), it is dangerous to make assumptions about living conditions in informal settlements.

**The author's name does not form part of the sentence:**

4. It is dangerous to make assumptions about living conditions in informal settlements (Brown, 2009, p. 17).

5. When people make assumptions about living conditions in informal settlements (Brown, 2009, p. 17) and also ignore the advice of local authorities, they have only themselves to blame when their businesses fail.

In examples 1 to 3, because the author's name is part of the grammatical structure of the sentence, it is not enclosed in brackets. If you are not certain whether to put the author's name inside or outside the brackets, try removing the name altogether and see if the sentence still makes sense. If it does not make sense, it means the name needs to be without brackets. In examples 4 and 5, the author's name is not part of the sentence, so it is placed within brackets. Now look again at example 5 and note the position of the
citation. Because only part of the information came from Brown, the position of the citation is in the middle of the sentence, after the relevant information sourced from Brown. If you put it at the end of the sentence, as in the first example, you would be implying that Brown also writes about people ignoring the advice of local authorities, which is not the case here. You would need to provide a different citation for the information about local authorities if you had found it in another source.

**More than one author cited**, and the citations are part of the grammatical structure of the sentence:

6. Mogale (2003) and Brown (2009) both describe how successful businesses are a result of careful planning.

If the **authors’ names are not part of the sentence**:

7. Careful planning is necessary if a newly established business is to have any chance of success (Brown, 2009; Mogale, 2003).

8. Careful planning (Brown, 2009; Mogale, 2003), as well as sufficient knowledge of how businesses function, are essential ingredients in any such venture.

In examples 7 and 8, what you are telling the reader is that both authors write about the same topic – that is, the need to plan carefully before setting up in business. What you have done is synthesised their similar views and presented them in one sentence. Note how the two citations are placed in brackets and separated by means of a semicolon.

**Two authors** have written a book together and the names of the co-authors are part of the sentence:

9. Mtongana and Mogale (2005) suggest that broad-based black economic empowerment should be aimed mainly at uplifting standards of living among the poor.

If the **co-authors’ names are not part of the sentence**:

10. Broad-based black economic empowerment should be aimed mainly at uplifting standards of living among the poor (Mtongana & Mogale, 2005).

It is important to note that in example 9 the two names are joined by ‘and’, but in example 10 they are joined by means of the symbol ‘&’ (called an ‘ampersand’) inside the brackets. The word ‘and’ indicates that the authors’ names are part of the grammatical structure of the sentence. An ampersand may be used in lists.

There are **several authors** who have written a book together, and the names of the authors are part of the sentence:

11. Jones et al (2009) claim that there will be a sharp rise in different kinds of business opportunities following the 2010 World Cup.
If the citation is not part of the sentence:

12. There will be a sharp rise in different kinds of business opportunities following the 2010 World Cup (Jones et al, 2009). (The Latin phrase ‘et al’ – which is used in academic writing – is an abbreviated form of et alii, meaning ‘and others’.)

Now look at those examples above in which the author's name is part of the sentence. You will notice that various reporting verbs, such as ‘cautions’, ‘suggest’ ‘claim’, etc, are used. There is a reason for this variety: the reporting verb you choose often reflects your attitude to what the writer that you are citing says. If you are somewhat sceptical, you are more likely to choose the verb ‘claims’ than ‘says’. Avoid monotony in your writing by using a wide range of reporting verbs, but ensure that you understand the meaning of each one fully before you use it. Below is a list of various ways to introduce references:

- As Brown points out …
- According to Jones …
- To quote from Mtongana …
- Mogale states/suggests that …
- Brown tells/shows us that …
- In an article entitled …, Jones makes the point that …
- Referring to …, Mtongana says that …
- Mogale asserts that …

If you begin your sentence with a phrase or subordinate clause, such as ‘Referring to his own experience, …’; or ‘As Brown points out in his well-argued essay, …’, do not forget to place a comma at the end of the phrase or clause before you continue with the rest of the sentence.

### 7.3.2 Compiling a reference list

If you have cited a source in the text of your essay, you must provide the full bibliographical details in a source list at the end of your essay. You should reference only those sources that are cited in the text. This list must be set in alphabetical order and must include the following information in the following order:

- Author's surname
- Author's initial(s)
- Year of publication (in brackets)
- The title of the book (underlined, if you are writing in longhand, or italicised, if your assignment is typed)
- Publisher
- Place of publication
Make sure that you punctuate each entry correctly, using the appropriate punctuation marks at each point.

If your information is from a journal article, then there will be some differences in the way you compile the information for the reference list. The example below illustrates those differences:


Notice that the title of the article is enclosed in inverted commas, and there is no publisher or place of publication. Instead, there is information on the title of the journal, the volume and number, as well as the pages in which the article appeared.

Sometimes you may wish to include information from a newspaper. The entry in your reference list should look something like this:


Some of the information that you use might be from an electronic source. Your entry should include the following information:

- the author's name, if it is given on the website
- the title of the document
- the date of publication, if given (otherwise include the abbreviation ‘n.d.’ which means ‘no date’)
- the date on which you visited the site, thus: ‘Retrieved on 1 January 2010 from …’
- the link to the website, otherwise referred to as the URL (you need to be careful to present the URL accurately, because just one error, even if it is a full stop or a slash in the wrong place, can make the site impossible to find)

At first glance, learning how to cite sources and compile a reference list correctly may seem rather complex to master. However, it becomes second nature with practice. You should just be prepared initially to get to grips with the requirements involved.

7.4 Using an assignment checklist

Use the following checklist to ensure that your assignment accurately represents your best possible efforts before you submit it:
Table 7.3: Assignment checklist

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Y/N</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Have I edited and proofread my completed assignment?</td>
<td>Y/N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have I followed the instructions and fulfilled the requirements?</td>
<td>Y/N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have I included the references for the sources of every direct quote, idea, thought or observation that is not my own?</td>
<td>Y/N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have I referenced the sources I have cited in the text?</td>
<td>Y/N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have I recorded the full bibliographical details of the sources in a source list?</td>
<td>Y/N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is my source list in alphabetical order?</td>
<td>Y/N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is my work neat and presentable?</td>
<td>Y/N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have I written my assignment in accordance with the requirement of the discipline?</td>
<td>Y/N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do I clearly state my intentions in the introduction?</td>
<td>Y/N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have I fulfilled the goals I set out to fulfil in my introduction?</td>
<td>Y/N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do I feel satisfied with the quality of my work?</td>
<td>Y/N</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Only when you can answer yes to each of these questions can you feel confident that your assignment is ready to be submitted for assessment.

**CONCLUSION**

As stated at the beginning of this chapter, your assignment is the main way that you communicate with your lecturer. It should therefore be a true representation of who you are, and should demonstrate the knowledge that you have gained as you have read around the topic in preparation for writing about it. Your assignment should also present the new knowledge that you have created as you have synthesised your notes from different sources and arrived at new understandings of the concepts with which it dealt. It should be clear that an assignment is not something that you can put off writing until the day before it is due.
Exercises

1. Take an assignment question that you have already answered, and analyse it, as described in Section 7.2.1. Would understanding it the way you do now have made a difference to your performance?

2. Now do the same with an imaginary assignment question that you have yet to answer. Suppose that, while reading for an assignment, you wrote down the bibliographical details in a notebook. However, the information relating to each source was jumbled up, and the list was not in any recognisable order. Rewrite each item, putting all the information in the correct format for a reference list, then write out the list in alphabetical order (note that these are made-up titles – you will not find them in any library):

   - R.E. Emery wrote an article entitled HIV-AIDS and child-headed households which was published in 2009 and appeared on pages 129–157 of volume 11 of a journal called The Psychologist.
   - J.B. Msimango’s article, Sure-fire Recipes for Business Success, was published on pages 12–47 of Making the Most of Your Opportunities, a book edited by B.S. Ntuli and J.H.B. Jones. The book was published in New York in 2010 by Wiscom Press Ltd.

3. Portfolio assignment questions

   (a) Essay questions
      Choose one of the following topics and write an essay of about 2 000 words. Observe all the conventions of academic essay writing discussed in this chapter:
      (i) The Internet has caused more harm than good to humanity in general, and to indigenous African cultures in particular. Discuss.
      (ii) Is the answer to the economic woes of the African subcontinent an agrarian rather than an industrial revolution? Discuss.

   (b) Reports
      Write a report on one of the following topics:
      (i) the extent to which the general living conditions of people in your area have improved/remained the same in the last five years
      (ii) the effects of the introduction of technology into South African classrooms: the experiences of two schools in your area
Chapter 7: Assignment Writing

References


The need to pass examinations and complete assignments requires something we may all dread doing … studying! Many students never develop an effective strategy for studying and tend to go about it in the way they have always done. The main purpose of this chapter is to help you discover some techniques and guidelines to improve your study skills and to perhaps even make of it a more enjoyable activity.

After studying this chapter, students should be able to:
• make some positive changes to the place where they normally study;
• view the work they have to study in a different light;
• understand the need for a study strategy and for sticking to this strategy; and
• select and use some skills that are practical enough to ease the challenge of studying and memorising content.

8.1 Introduction
Having a workable and efficient study-skills strategy is the basis of being a successful student. Being more efficient means that you will retain more information and be less stressed during the final stages before you hand in an assignment or write an examination; it will ultimately help you save time when studying.

Most students never pay attention to how they study at school or university. For understandable reasons, they are more likely to spend their time on the activity rather than thinking about it, analysing and understanding it, or choosing an approach that works best for them. It reminds us of the saying that some people are so busy trying to make a living that they have no time left to make a real life for themselves.

You need to understand and accept that:
• there are better, more efficient ways to study;
• there is immense value in finding the right activities to help you to study better and to motivate you;
• there are advantages in having a clear strategy for studying, and that a method to study efficiently will help you clarify and sharpen your purpose, and focus on your studies;
Chapter 8: Study Skills

• there are advantages in looking critically at your current methods of studying and developing better and more efficient ways of doing it; and
• there are practical, small changes you can make to help you get much better results.

8.2 Understanding studying as a process

Focusing your thoughts on studying only during the brief interludes when you set aside a few hours to quickly cram for an examination or complete an assignment will never allow you to understand that learning is a process. Learning is a process that you need to see as comprising a set of interlinked sets of activities. It goes beyond just grabbing a textbook and trying to memorise facts to get you through the examination that is looming on the horizon.

Figure 8.1 shows the spiral of learning. This is a visual representation of the complete learning process that you have to make provision for in your studies.

Figure 8.1: The learning spiral

8.3 Some practical suggestions for studying

Now that it is evident that studying is a process and that you need to keep the bigger picture in mind all the time while you are studying, the next sections look at particular practices you may follow to help and support you in the process.

8.3.1 The physical environment

Stake your territorial claim somewhere! Find and start organising a place in your home or at the college library, or perhaps in your dorm room, where you will always be able to sit and study. A quiet place with no distractions works best for most people. Creating a physical environment for your studying will make it possible for you to have somewhere where you can:

- set out your textbooks and accompanying notes in neat groups;
- keep your favourite pens and writing instruments to inject some fun into the experience;
- use a wall on which you can stick the semester calendar marked with important academic dates; and
- put up motivating pictures of places you intend to visit when you graduate or of things you want to buy with your first salary after graduating.

The other members of the household or the people you are sharing digs with will recognise this as a place where you go to focus and concentrate. When you are sitting there, they need to try to be quiet and not disturb you. But the most important thing about having your own special physical environment for studying is that scientists encourage us to study using the same spot for the activity because the brain recognises the venue and becomes more receptive and less likely to wander when you use the same place to study.

8.3.2 Things that simply make sense to do

Have your stationery instruments around you: never read a textbook or other academic script without a highlighter or pen to mark the important passages, the things you want to remember or the keywords. Keep a separate file containing your summary notes for each subject and always have enough notepads for summaries, mind maps, drawings and notes on keywords from the texts.

Set an objective for each session. Never allow yourself to get caught in the cycle of ‘I’ll study until I am tired.’ That way, it is tempting to stop when you imagine tiredness starting to creep in. Set immovable targets, like completing two chapters of a textbook or summarising at least a chapter before calling it a day. That way, your targets are specific and you feel motivated to achieve them.
Setting objectives helps develop positive patterns. There is emerging scientific evidence that your brain recognises patterns to the extent that you may find it easier to memorise facts about the same subject, at the same time, on the same day of the week. So, for example, having a study schedule whereby you study statistics from 4 p.m. to 8 p.m. every Tuesday may actually aid your learning.

Warm up by quickly paging through the chapters you have looked at previously. This helps your brain to re-establish the links with what you have already done and creates important connections with the chapter that you are going to work on next. The brain can maintain and build the complete picture of the subject only if you help it to explore the ideas and thinking logically, and fit the pieces together as you progress through the book. Academic books are structured in a way that builds chapter content on previous chapters, so missing a step could mean missing out on an important link in the chain of your memory.

Never skip the chapter marked ‘Introduction’! Introductory chapters almost always set out the pattern of the rest of the textbook. Even though there may well not be an examination or assignment question derived directly from this chapter, reading and understanding it will nevertheless give you a head start because it will help you create the separate and clearly defined ‘files’ in which to keep the knowledge and facts on the book in your brain as you read and explore the later chapters. For example, you may be reading a chapter that covers defining the target population in research to understand what role this population plays in your studies on market research. Having read the introductory chapter, you will therefore already know that you will soon be learning about what to do with the information and knowledge about the target population which you are now studying.

Take a break! You not only need to have your favourite snack now and then, but you also need to aid the alertness levels of your brain by moving about, doing something completely different, like making a cup of coffee and watching the birds at the feeder during your coffee break, or walking to the shop to buy a chocolate bar. Having a break every 45 minutes is essential and the consensus is that breaks should last at least 15 minutes. Use this time to do something completely different. The bad news is that checking emails or messages on your phone, or watching television are not good options for your breaks, as they do not help: these activities don’t impart the beneficial effects of physical activity and pausing to break your concentration.

Make notes while you read. Notes containing the main points of a chapter help you gain confidence because you have written proof of what you have covered. Note taking also helps you to feel less intimidated at the start of the examination season, when you see how you have conveniently condensed the textbook into the notes you
have made on it. Notes should never be an attempt to rewrite a textbook in your own hand. Instead, just write down the headings and one or two word lists reflecting the main points under the headings. Many students make notes that are too extensive – the idea is to shorten the textbook content into more manageable chunks.

Write your notes by hand. There is ample scientific evidence to suggest that students who write their notes using a pen and paper are more likely to remember the facts later than those who type them up.

Find someone to discuss your work with. Students who study in small groups and have opportunities to talk about their study material with someone else are a lot more successful and remember the content better. The discussion helps to create context for the facts and there is the opportunity to hear someone else talk about the facts that you need to memorise. This is a major advantage. You also get the chance to find out how other people view the same content. This gives you the opportunity to gain a better understanding of something you may have been struggling to understand.

Learn to deal with interruptions constructively. The lights may go out as you are in the middle of making sense of a chapter. You may get a call from someone who is important to you inviting you for a drink or a meal and have to decline. But, if you do accept, do not lose trust in your schedule or abandon your study plan for the week. Instead, note the time you have lost through the interruption and find the time to make up for it later. The worst thing you can do is to lose heart and be tempted to give up just because you’ve succumbed an interruption.

Tape yourself reading some of the main points of the chapter. Then listen to the recorded bits on your iPod or phone when you are travelling on the bus. This is a great time-saving option, and hearing the content adds the stimulation of using another sense in the learning process. We know for a fact that more of your senses are stimulated, the more likely you will be to store and retrieve information from your long-term memory.

Always have one of your textbooks with you in your car or in your bag. We routinely have times during the day when we have to wait to see a client or a doctor, or when there is a long queue at the bank and it means waiting for 20 minutes with nothing to do. These stolen moments spent on reading a few passages from your textbook may be hugely valuable if it means you can cover an important learning objective. The end of the chapter is normally a sign of the end of the study session for most students. But, before you close your book:

• briefly reflect on the main learning points you have covered in that chapter; and
• glance at the previous chapters again, so that you have a clear picture of where the present chapter fits into the bigger picture of the entire book.
Most academic books have questions at the end of the chapters to help you consolidate what you have covered. Read through these and attempt to answer them by writing down the main points you would cover the next time you return to the book. This will help you refresh your memory and give you an idea of the extent to which you are able to recall the content. And it often gives your confidence a boost to realise that you remember more than you had thought you would. Revisiting the chapter will also provide some new insight into the context and focus of the next chapter.

Many of the practical hints covered in this chapter have been concerned with context. Most students tend to concentrate only on remembering facts and being able to recall facts for an examination or test, to the extent that they almost never get to understand the context in which these facts reside. Context is everything in your efforts to be a successful student. Understanding context will enhance your ability to recall facts because you will have a better grip on the bigger picture of the entire book.

8.3.3 A note on notes

It is a sad reality that most students are unable to make notes that are genuinely useful and that serve as a real aid to more effective study. Some rewrite the entire textbook! So, instead of ending up with a shorter, condensed version of the textbook – because that is, after all, the most important reason for making notes – they end up with a file thick enough to warrant hiring a small truck to cart it around to classes and back! When examination time arrives, they look at this tome and seriously contemplate fleeing the country rather than tackling this seemingly insurmountable mountain of work.

The extract below is an example of a set of ‘summary notes’ that a certain student produced from a small section of The MBA handbook, by Sheila Cameron (2001).

### Example of note taking (Part 1)

**Freeing the additional time you need for studies**

This requires creative thinking but doing so may free up lots of additional time. If you commute in a slow train you add at least three hours of study time. If you fly around at frequent intervals, waiting at the airport and reading during the flight adds extra time. An already prepared healthy meal brought from the supermarket can save you the extra hours in front of the stove cooking the meal. Cutting down on social activities, like visiting friends, going to the pub or watching TV with the family, saves a lot of time.

One of the best ways of finding additional time is to set up a weekly timetable. The times for studying can be shown on it. You will need the involvement of your family for this because a study timetable means taking time away from them and spending less time doing things with them. Your timetable should not be demanding, therefore, or they’ll feel neglected. It should take your family needs into account. If you do not involve them, they may sabotage your efforts.
Successful people always tend to say they manage on less than four hours’ sleep at night. Do not assume you do the same. Rather, gradually reduce your sleeping time until you reach your ideal time you need for your own, personal system. If you cut sleep back drastically, you’ll be able to burn the midnight oil in an emergency situation. But if sleeping less makes you irritable and unable to concentrate, this option is not for you and sticking to it may affect your health over time.

Saving all the time you can for reading and studying does not mean leaving no time for relaxation. Your study programme must have some time in it for relaxing and doing things you love. Sport and active relaxation must be part of your programme and may even enhance the positive aspects of the programme.

Source: Adapted from Cameron (2001): p. 65

Looking at the notes in the extract above, what do you think are the obvious disadvantages in going about note taking in this way? Here are some of the more obvious things that this student did wrong, making the task of understanding the original material more difficult than it should be:

• The notes are too extensive! The notes are in fact longer than the piece in the textbook on which they were based.
• There are too many superfluous words. Effective learning requires the assimilation of keywords and this summary hides the keywords among all the unnecessary words.
• The overall view of the piece of work causes vague but persistent feelings of claustrophobia – there are no spaces to allow the eyes to rest and the brain to reflect.
• There is nothing in these notes to make the reader feel excited or to make you want to read and memorise them: the result is simply another piece of writing that one has to read through.

Fortunately, there are some students who have evolved the note-taking process to incorporate the idea of ‘less is more’. The following extract shows a note-form summary of the same extract from the Cameron’ (2001) book. However, this time the notes have been taken in a somewhat different way.
Chapter 8: Study Skills

Example of note taking (Part 2)

Finding additional study time
Think creatively
• Use time to communicate on train/bus
• While waiting at the train station
• During the train journey
• Buy prepared meals
• Less television – only watch family favourites

Draw up a weekly timetable
• Clearly block out study time
• Involve family in decisions about this
• Provide enough time in it for family

Cut down on sleep
• Calculate current time spent on this
• Gradually reduce
• Find ideal balance for self
• Less sleep = distress and anxiety – not good option

Relaxation
• Study plan must provide time for this
• Reward myself with doing favourite things
• Sporting and being active – important

Finding extra time for study
• Relaxation plan for this; do favourite things
• Creative options – use time on bus, airplane, rather than cooking and watching television
• Weekly timetable
• Reduce time spent on electronic devices

Source: Adapted from Cameron (2001): p. 56

You will immediately notice some of the most obvious differences between the two attempts at summarising the same piece of work. The second attempt shows the following characteristics:

• The main points stand out clearly and are highlighted as headings.
• The supporting points are logically clustered around the main points.
• The main points and supporting points are easier to memorise.
• There is space on the page, giving a less cluttered effect and making you feel less anxious when you see it.
• All the facts fit nicely together as a coherent collection of information on one page. This makes it much easier for the brain to grasp the context of the facts and for you to remember the facts when you need to recall them later.
The note format has reduced the volume of the original text. This means it will be less intimidating when you have to go through it at examination time. What a bonus!

It meets the test for a really good set of notes: an entire chapter on one page.

Figure 8.2 is another example of how the same piece can be summarised – this time using mind mapping:

What are the advantages of mind mapping? It is not something every student may want to do when making notes. However, it is a worthwhile exercise because there are several advantages to be gained from drawing mind maps:

- They are more fun to make. Fun is good because fun makes the process enjoyable!
- You can make use of your creative skills. Learning theory tells us that we recall more if we employ more skills during the learning process.

**Figure 8.2: Example of note taking (mind map)**

Source: Adapted from Cameron (2001): p. 56
• You can incorporate colour when composing mind maps. Colour stimulates the senses and adds more to the recall mechanism, making it even easier to remember.

• Mind maps are exceptionally good instruments for creating context. You should even try to represent an entire textbook in one mind map – you will then find that understanding the content becomes as easy as falling off a log.

There is more on mind maps in Section 8.3.5.

8.3.4 The tyranny of time

Students enjoy the freedom they have – and they should. Soon you will complete your qualification and end up in the world of work, when you will suddenly realise that every moment starts to count. Soon there will be someone at work managing your life – and your time. The problem with having the freedom now, though, means that you are free to do many things – including putting off starting that assignment or reading that chapter in preparation for class. And, let’s face it, there is a certain level of excitement inherent in knowing that the assignment has to be submitted in a few hours and you do not even know what the questions look like. That heady rush of adrenalin as you frantically phone around your friends and the relief that they are all pretty much as clueless as you are! That warm sense of happily sharing the naked panic that settles at the pit of your stomach and makes your mind spin – pretty cool!

There’s the initial fun of being able to postpone – your moments of freedom – but then the horrible crash when postponing becomes the cold reality of a submission date or some other such minor detail over which you have no control.

If it is your objective to be average and melt into the crowd, then you might find it momentarily exciting to be just like the rest and exist in a continual, frenetic, last-minute rush to get things done. Later, you will entertain your friends with how close to the cut-off time you handed your assignment in, and how, if it had not been for the fact that you jumped a few red traffic lights on the way, you would never have made the deadline. How you felt the breeze at the back of your neck as the supervisor’s door was being shut in the face of the student immediately behind you in the queue to hand in. Nothing beats living on the edge at times.

Although this tendency to postpone assignments to the last minute and to hand in work with the last few stragglers may seem to be exciting and fun while you enjoy the life of a student, the danger lies in it becoming a way of life – one that will hold you back at work and become a constant drag and obstacle in your progress through life.
Not doing things in good time is one of the most common reasons that students fail in higher education. The following are some of the common explanations given by students for not completing required coursework:

- ‘I did not feel like reading that chapter last night. I just did not have the energy.’

Students often perceive a textbook as a huge, insurmountable obstacle that sits on their desk softly whispering their name just to make them feel guilty every time they walk past it. The solution to this is to remember that that off-putting book is made up of smaller bits. You may even find some of those passages interesting! Just do a few pages at a time and read the introduction. Break the ‘big, fat, terrible book’ down into sections that you feel are more manageable and read through one at a time. Who knows, you may even like the stuff they talk about in there! You could become hooked and love it. You’ll never know until you start, though. Just doing the small bits you do understand will help you complete the picture – eventually the outlines will emerge and you will be able to fill in the missing parts.

- ‘I could not get started on this assignment because I did not know what to put in the Introduction’ or ‘I just did not know where to start answering Question 2.’

There is no rule that states that you have to start at the beginning. Instead, work on your assignments by answering the questions as you come across the relevant sections in the textbook that relate to your assignment questions. You can also come back to it and finalise the answers later. Introductions are, in any case, meant to be written only after you have completed answering all the questions for the assignment.

- ‘This chapter was too much of a challenge to me. I could not finish it because there are too many concepts in it I do not understand.’

Some subject content is meant to be hard to grasp. The fact that you are a student implies that you are in the business of coming across and solving intellectual challenges. Use Google Scholar to search the concepts you struggle with or ask a colleague what he or she thinks of the offending passage that is giving you a hard time. Or boost your manager’s ego by asking his or her opinion. If you do not postpone, you will almost always be able to find help.

- ‘The dog ate my assignment.’ … ‘As I was getting out my car my assignment slipped out of my hand and fell through the grid into the sewerage system that runs beneath the city streets and I cannot think where I am going to find it now.’ … ‘As I was doing the final paragraph, reflecting on what I had learnt by doing the assignment, my laptop crashed!’ … ‘On my way to drop the assignment, I stopped to buy smokes, and someone broke into my car and stole my laptop and the disk on which I was saving things.’ … ‘My little sister borrowed my laptop and downloaded the latest version of *The Return of the Green Venom Man* over my work.’
Life happens to all of us. You can be sure that some of the stories academics get told about the terrible fate that befell some assignments just when they were at the point of being handed in are true, even when they sound pretty fantastical at times. Central to the entire idea, though, is the need to allow plenty of time to do coursework, and not to postpone it to the point that you have to make up a convoluted tale about why it is not ready. And always save your work on an external device that cannot be stolen, destroyed or used by others – and preferably one that is too big or too unpalatable for the dog to chew on.

More important, though, than any of the titbits of advice contained in this chapter is to get into the habit of using a special skill adopted by certain students, who almost always come out on top: as you go through your textbooks, keep a running file in which you can insert various pieces of useful information that you come across, which you can later use in your assignments. There is no rule prescribing that you have to write an assignment by starting at the introduction and then answer each question in sequence. Start with what you have; start with what you know and then fill in the gaps as you go along. This may perhaps not seem like a logical approach to writing an assignment, but it works and it means you will be able to complete it and hand it in.

8.3.5 Mind mapping as a study aid

Mind maps were discussed above in terms of their value for note taking. As well as the fact that mind maps are a useful and easy technique to help you study and memorise large tracts of work, they can also save you a lot of time because they can be used to give you an overview of an entire book in one glance.

Many students do not like mind mapping and will tell you that mind maps have little value for them. But we all learn in different ways and you may just want to try this method to find out how useful it can be. Take a moment to think of the chapters you have covered in this book so far. How clear are the structure and context of each chapter to you now as you reflect on them? Imagine the difference a mind map of the entire book would make. Figure 8.3 is a mind map representation of this present textbook. (The subsections of some of the main points in the chapters have been left out of the mind map for you to fill in.)
CONCLUSION

Studying can be one of the most demanding aspects of your time spent in higher education. It is therefore important that you develop a programme for studying and an approach to studying that fit in with a learning style with which you are comfortable. Most students complete their studies without ever discovering what the best way is for them as individuals to learn. This is a pity because finding your own, individual studying groove is very rewarding and liberating: your marks go up and you experience a much less stressed existence as a student. The options for studying and the various practical tips provided in this chapter should set you on the road to discovering how you best function in your studying and which studying approach will make a difference to your learning journey.
Chapter 8: Study Skills

Exercises

1. Take a chapter from one of your textbooks and develop a mind map for it. Look at the completed mind map and make a list of the advantages that drawing it up has given you in terms of your understanding of the chapter content.

2. One of the worst enemies of any student and among the most frequently occurring obstacles that keep students from obtaining their qualifications is the tendency to postpone work until the last minute. What are the practical things you could do to develop habits of timeliness and kick the postponement habit?

3. SQ3R is a reading strategy explained in Chapter 3 of this book. How could you use the mind mapping tool in this strategy? At which stage of this strategy would you actually draw the mind map?

References


Examination Skills
Litha Beekman

Chapter 9

The purpose of this chapter is to enable you to develop and improve your existing examination skills in order to perform well at college or university.

After studying this chapter, students should be able to:
• plan a study schedule for an examination;
• prepare for an examination;
• manage the stress and anxiety associated with writing exams;
• manage the exam process; and
• master examination writing techniques.

9.1 Introduction

Preparing for examinations is a large part of what academic skills are designed to help you to do. Using study skills together with effective thinking, reading and writing techniques is the cornerstone for successfully writing examinations. The better your general study skills are, the easier your examination preparation will be. For example, if you have followed a timetable and studied during the term, and have applied a study method and made notes and summaries, you should not have problems with preparing for and writing the examination.

All students need to acquire effective examination skills, because in today’s world the learning process does not stop after graduation. The knowledge explosion brought about by information and communication technology – and the way it has changed the way the world acquires and uses information – means that people need to study as long as they live to keep up to date with the newest developments in their fields, and to acquire new skills so that they remain employable.

Examinations are part of formal education. They are needed to assess whether students have met the outcomes of modules at the end of the academic term. Various methods of assessment, such as tests with essays and multiple questions, open-book exams, and assignments in the form of project reports, portfolios of evidence, case studies, practical demonstrations and orals are used during the term and in the final examination.
9.2 Study scheduling for examinations

When you write examinations, your goal is to perform at your peak. To achieve that, you need to have a positive attitude to your studies, and be well prepared and confident. Being well prepared means starting early in the semester, having clear goals and managing your time effectively. There are different types of study schedules that can be used to plan time effectively. Choose a planner that suits you – for example, a calendar, wall planner or scheduling software, whatever works best for you. There are three main types of schedules:

• Semester or year planner. This can be used to note important dates, such as block periods for tests and examinations, and the dates when assignments are due. You should also include social, cultural and sports events that you are going to take part in, as well as your personal appointments, such as family commitments, for example, that will have an impact on your studies. Students doing distance-education courses and part-time students need to make provision for busy months at work and aim to use off-peak periods to get through as much work as possible during the semester. Using a semester or year planner will give you an instant overview of your commitments for the entire academic year.

• Weekly planner during the term. This allows you to plan time for daily activities each week. A week planner should include your class attendance, study time, revision periods, recreation and personal commitments (and, of course, time for sleeping).

• Weekly planner during the pre-exam period. You should pay very close attention to planning your weekly schedule during the block week and the examination period. Divide your study time across all your subjects. Take into consideration what time of the day you are most alert and study most effectively. Study difficult aspects of your work when you are most alert and the less difficult parts at other times. For each time slot – for example, early in the morning, midday, afternoon or evening – ask yourself what you want to achieve. Set goals for every time slot and for every day during the block week and the examination period. Plan your days with blocks of time for different sections of subjects, for revising what you have learnt and to allow breaks between study periods. Some students can study for about an hour without a break, but some lose concentration after 30 minutes. Therefore, plan the blocks of time according to your preference and studying style. Use the details that are discussed later in this chapter on how to manage the exam-writing process to complete the pre-exam and exam schedule.

9.3 Examination-related stress and anxiety

Stress and anxiety are very common among students in higher education who are preparing for examinations. Almost everyone feels nervous before an examination and worries about whether they will be able to answer the questions. Examinations
sometimes overwhelm students and cause symptoms that have a detrimental effect on studying. In extreme cases, panic may set in and you are no longer able to think clearly and concentrate on your studies. You might feel that your mind becomes blank. Therefore, it is important that you understand what stress and anxiety are, and what causes them. You then need to learn how to prevent stress by recognising the signs and symptoms when it occurs, and learn how to manage it effectively. Here are some facts about stress that you need to understand:

- Stress is related to phenomena such as pressure, worry and tension.
- Stress is the reaction of a person to a problem or an event, such as writing an examination.
- The causes of stress are known: for example, you know that you have to write an examination, do an oral presentation or complete a project that is pending. Stress is therefore a temporary problem that can be managed by addressing the source of the stress. Examples are being granted an extension for an assignment or giving yourself enough time to prepare well for an examination.
- Anxiety is a feeling of tension and fear, which often goes together with stress.
- Some people have a high level of anxiety and become anxious very easily. If you are such a person, you should talk to a counsellor because it might be that you have low self-confidence or that you approach problems in a negative way.
- If stress and anxiety are not managed, they can become severe and lead to depression.
- A small amount of stress and anxiety can be to your benefit because it motivates you to study. If you experience no stress at all, it might be that you are too relaxed to prepare properly for the examination and consequently might end up not performing well.

### 9.3.1 Signs and symptoms of stress

Stress and anxiety can lead to physical, mental and emotional signs and symptoms, including the following:

- Physical – headaches, neck- and backaches, disturbance of sleep, change in eating habits, indigestion, diarrhoea, chest discomfort, fast and shallow breathing, and other health problems.
- Mental – irritability, forgetfulness, lack of concentration and feeling mentally drained.
- Emotional – frustration, aggression, withdrawal and lack of interest in studies.

Watch out for these signs and symptoms. If you experience them, but do not know how to manage them, seek help from a student or peer counsellor at your institution, or any counsellor. Recognise signs of stress and do not let it interfere with your studies – manage it or find help.
9.3.2 Preventing stress and anxiety

If you know that examinations are events that cause stress in most students, why wait until you are stressed out and have succumbed to the symptoms of stress? The first line of defence is always prevention. The following measures can be taken to help you avoid experiencing stress and anxiety:

- Get organised in your studying by planning well ahead. Use a semester/year planner and a weekly planner to plan your study schedule, and stick to it. This way, you will study every day and revise, putting yourself in a better position to do well in tests and assignments. This will prepare you for the examination period and allow you to revise during exam time, and not have to learn new material from scratch at the last minute.

- Eat and sleep well. Eat balanced meals, instead of junk food. Get enough sleep, and do not change your sleeping habits during exam times.

- Learn how to relax. Physical exercise is always effective in helping to work off stress, whether it is jogging, going to the gym, soccer or any other form of activity that you enjoy. You can also learn to meditate.

- Avoid stressful situations and stay clear of hazardous habits, such as taking drugs or too much alcohol. Avoid self-medication with over-the-counter stimulants to keep you awake or increase your alertness. These may cause side effects, such as headaches, sleeplessness and irritability in some users.

- Set priorities and realistic goals. Be honest with yourself about your abilities.

- Be goal-oriented and keep focused on your studies. To help you with this, visualise the day you graduate and the day you take up your preferred employment by forming a picture of these milestones in your mind.

- See life as a challenge, and change how you approach stressful situations and respond to them. Take control of your attitude and responses. View examinations as steps on your career ladder that will open new doors to your future.

The prevention of stress and anxiety is generally something you should do as part of life management. The fewer stressors there are in your life, the less there will be to stress about. Learn how to manage relationship, financial and health problems. By finding solutions and solving your problems you are more likely to be a happy person who lives a balanced life.

9.3.3 Managing stress and anxiety

Using these mechanisms to prevent stress will help minimise its effect on you. One does, however, always experience some stress and anxiety in the days before, during and even after the examination. The good news is that this form of stress can be managed if you take steps before you start going round in circles and becoming anxious and depressed. The following are steps you can take to manage examination stress:
• The days before the examination –
  • Do not deprive yourself of sleep. Eat and sleep well, do physical exercise and apply relaxation techniques.
  • Banish neurotic thoughts and self-created limitations, such as ‘if I fail my examination, my life will be ruined’ or ‘the questions for this paper are normally very difficult’ from your mind. These thoughts will create more stress. What you need to do is focus on positive thoughts, such as ‘I am going to study and perform to the best of my ability’ or ‘I am going to stick to my timetable and be as well prepared as possible in the time I have available’.
  • Put yourself in a positive frame of mind by imagining how you would like the examination to go. Make a video in your mind about how you will turn up at the exam room well prepared, feeling relaxed and confident, and answering the questions one by one. By doing this, you replace negative thoughts with positive ones, and you desensitise yourself from examination anxiety.
  • Avoid friends and classmates who are stressed because their stress will only add to your stress.

• During the examination –
  • Use breathing exercises. Breathe in slowly in a deep and relaxed manner, and breathe out slowly in a lengthy and relaxed manner by forming an ‘O’ shape with your lips. While doing deep breathing, keep your whole body relaxed, back straight, feet firmly on the ground, arms and shoulders relaxed, and your mind focused on the relaxing effect of your breathing.
  • Use thought-stopping techniques when you have negative thoughts, such as ‘I can’t answer anything’. If this happens, halt your thoughts by saying ‘stop’ in your mind. Once you have stopped, use the breathing exercise, relax and calmly focus on the question again.
  • Use self-talk by giving yourself positive messages, such as ‘I am going to do my best’; ‘relax, concentrate, it is going to be okay’ or ‘this is just the effect of anxiety, it is okay to be a little anxious’.
  • Use a bridging object, such as an elastic band around your pulse or a chain around your neck – something you associate with calmness and positive thoughts. Touching this object can be comforting and calming. Then focus on the question again.

Stress management is the ability to maintain control when people and events create tension that affects you. If you cannot escape from it, flow with it and try to control it by applying the measures highlighted above. Limit the number of events and things going on in your life, and focus on your examination as a priority. The rest, such as a troublesome relationship, can be dealt with after the examination.
9.4 Examination techniques

Writing examinations is a skill you can learn. Doing well in examinations has as much to do with critical reading and examination-writing techniques as with examination preparation. There are helpful techniques you can learn for the different types of questions, such as essays and multiple-choice questions. The following sections describe some of the techniques you can use.

9.4.1 Essay questions and answers

When students do not perform well in exam essays, it is often because they have not analysed the question and have not answered the question that was asked. When answering essay questions, you are usually expected to provide more than just facts: you are often required to explain, to review critically, to evaluate, to give an opinion, develop an idea or discuss a point of view. You need to explain your ideas clearly and refer to relevant examples. Analyse the question and answer it precisely and concisely. Present your arguments and ideas in such a way that the assessor (lecturer) can see that you have the relevant knowledge and understanding of the topic. Use the following pointers during tests or examinations:

- Get right to the point, and state your main point(s) in the first sentence. Use the first paragraph to provide an overview of your essay.
- Use the rest of the essay to discuss these points in more detail.
- Back up your points with specific information and examples.
- Writing without understanding the question is time-consuming and usually futile.
- Assessors are influenced by compactness, completeness and clarity, expressed in a well-organised answer.

9.4.2 Multiple-choice questions and answers

Multiple-choice questions (also called multiple-response questions) are formulated in different ways. Make sure that you read and reread the question until you understand it. The chance of getting an answer correct by guessing is not very high. Your best strategy is to be well prepared by knowing the learning material and by using specific techniques, such as the following:

- Hide the answer options, read the question and try to formulate the correct answer.
- Then read through all the alternative answers, even if you think yours is correct.
- Eliminate answers you know are wrong.
- Eliminate answers that contradict common sense or are illogical.
- Answers you cannot understand are often incorrect.
- Take a close look at answers that include absolutes such as ‘always’, ‘never’, ‘all’ and ‘none’ – these words often make statements false.
• Be especially attentive to negative questions, which include phrases such as ‘Which of these are not …?’; ‘All of these except …’

• Watch your time carefully and do not spend too much time on one question. If you do not know the answer, move on and return to it when you have time left.

• Do not guess. Read the directions – there might be a warning that wrong answers will be penalised.

### 9.4.3 Open-book exams

Open-book exams are used for certain subjects – for example, statistics papers in the social sciences or certain subjects in law. With these types of exams, specific guidelines are given to students about the study materials they will be allowed to take into the examination room, such as the study guide and textbook. Open-book exams can give a false sense of security because students think that they only need to know where to find answers. However, you are evaluated on your understanding rather than on your ability to recall or find facts. Therefore, you need to be thoroughly prepared, and know the arguments and viewpoints in the textbook. You will not have time to read the textbook during the exam – only to search for information. So, make sure that you are familiar with the content and that you understand it.

Do the following preparation:

• Keep up to date with readings and assignments in class or tutorials during the term.

• Prepare brief, concise notes on ideas and concepts discussed in the book.

• Select carefully which material you bring to the examination room. Make sure that you know what is admissible and what is not.

• Anticipate model questions. Challenge yourself to think about the answers you would need for these questions and what resources you might need.

• Organise your reference material, your ‘open book’. Use coloured stickers to quickly find sections and particular arguments.

### 9.4.4 Mathematics, statistics and accounting exams

Subjects that deals with figures and calculations are abstract and cannot be studied in the same way as those subjects that are text-bound, such as social sciences.

• Prepare well in advance. Pay attention in class and study the work every day. These subjects use a building process, so you need to understand each step before you can proceed to the next one. The more exercises you complete, the more advanced your skills will be. Work through previous test and exam papers to answer as many questions as possible. Find assistance from a fellow student, tutor or lecturer when you get stuck.

• During the examination, read the question carefully and interpret it correctly.
• Write your answer step by step. Keep checking your calculations. Work as neatly as possible.
• If you get stuck on a problem, move on and return to it later. When you have completed all the questions, re-check all your answers and tackle the problematic questions again.

9.4.5 Portfolio of evidence

A portfolio of evidence (PoE) is a method of assessment often used in subjects where practical work forms part of the course – for example, in social work, nursing, education, psychology, sociology, environmental science, architecture and many more. A PoE is a collection of documents and/or artefacts (items, objects, products) that present evidence of what a student has learnt. An example is a PoE compiled by a student teacher during practical teaching at a school. This might comprise a folder containing lesson plans, educational aids used (e.g. PowerPoint slides) and a video of the teaching session. In business administration, it might include evidence such as action plans, project reports and minutes of meetings. A visual-art PoE might include artworks, such as paintings and photographs.

Evidence for the PoE is collected during the term or practicum, and a submission date and venue are scheduled on the examination timetable. Late submission of a PoE has the same implications as not showing up for an examination and will not be accepted.

A PoE can be physically presented in the format of a folder, file or box with documents and items, or a model or design. It can also be compiled electronically with written documents, photos and videos. Lecturers will provide guidelines for composing a portfolio with regard to the topic, evidence to be collected and the way it is to be presented. The PoE should be neatly compiled with an index, divisions and addendums of evidence and references.

The rationale for a PoE is to present the evidence of what a student has learnt and whether the evidence presented is sufficient to prove that the student has achieved the outcomes of the module. Evidence should be relevant, current and authentic. The latter means that it must be clear that the evidence is a reflection of the student’s own performance. A written declaration has to be completed and signed by the student, stating that the evidence in the PoE is the original work of the student and that it has been produced without assistance from others.
9.5 Managing the examination writing process

Final examinations are comprehensive – they assess your knowledge of the material from the entire term or semester. This might seem overwhelming if you do not know how to manage the process. The following are techniques and practices that can help you manage the examination process.

9.5.1 Before the examination

**Using your time productively**

- Prioritise what you study, because time is limited. Higher-education students are faced with piles of notes and reading material. Remember that your learner/study guide, assignments and tutorial letters, tests, notes and textbooks are all part of the study material. Do not start reviewing material randomly. Plan before you start. Consult the learner/study guide. Identify exactly what needs to be studied and how long it will take for each section of the material. Figure out which material is most important, prioritise it and study it first and in depth.

- Listen for clues from the lecturer and tutor, especially during the last contact session before the exam.

- Arrange a group study session with fellow classmates, so that you can clear doubts by means of discussion. If there are still aspects you are not clear about, contact the tutor or lecturer.

- Identify those areas you find difficult and work through them.

- Work on test and exam papers from previous years and discuss answers with a fellow classmate. Complete some exam papers as if they were mock exams to practise writing within time limits. Many students complain of not having enough time to complete papers in the two or three hours that are allocated.

- Use your own test papers and review your answers. Identify where you have lost marks and add the correct answers until you have 100 per cent for the paper. It often happens that questions from previous tests are asked again in exam papers, so this is time well spent.

**Getting the best out of revision**

Revision time is a strategic time for you to learn as much as you can, to develop the ‘big picture’, to form an overview of what you have to learn and to get an in-depth understanding of the details of the subject material. Revision is an effective way to reinforce what you have learned. Information in the short-term memory is stored in the long-term memory when you revise it. To do this, you need to be actively engaged with the material – simply reading or highlighting it is too passive for effective recall. Getting information into your long-term memory takes time.
and effort. If you leave revision until the exam block period, it will be too late and you will have to cram. Learning from cramming only goes into the short-term memory, and is forgotten quickly. That is evidenced by the fact that students often say they experience a blank spot during exams.

Revision should therefore be a continuous process throughout the term. With effective revision planned into your weekly timetable during the term and the pre-exam timetable nearer to the exam, you take control of the examination process. You should study your work each day at the end of the day, revise it after 24 hours, at the end of the week and again at the end of the month. This will leave you with less work to catch up with in the period immediately before your exams.

The following are key revision tips:

- Revise during the term, and do not leave it until the block week.
- Plan well in advance. Add revision time to your weekly schedule planner.
- Make sure that you have effective summaries of the learning material, and use these to revise your work. Draw mind maps to summarise a chapter or topic. Use the keywords as triggers for revision and for recalling facts. If you cannot recall all the facts from the mind map go back to it and then back to the comprehensive summary and the textbook. Make sure that you have an in-depth understanding of the facts and concepts.
- Write short notes on pocket-sized ‘cram cards’ to memorise important facts. Use these to revise facts a few times a day. You can stick them on your wall or mirror.
- Make revision active. Use academic reading techniques (see Chapter 3) and be inquisitive. Ask questions and draw conclusions. Do not use rote learning to learn facts, so that you can simply recite them like a parrot. Make sure you understand the material.
- Practise answering questions from past exam papers.
- Prioritise topics nearer to the time of the exam. Do not ‘spot’ and gamble on particular questions.

**Be prepared**

- Check the date, time and venue for the examination.
- Put together your stationery, such as pens (at least two), pencils, calculator, identification document and student card the night before the exam.
- Plan your transport and, if necessary, parking arrangements.
- If you are not familiar with the venue, visit it before the exam, so that you know the exact location and the way there. Estimate traffic congestion and allow enough time to reach the venue in good time. This will decrease your stress.
Academic Literacy

The morning on the day of the examination

- Have breakfast. You might not feel like it, but you will lose concentration if you start feeling hungry and tired halfway through the session. If you are to write an exam in an afternoon session, have a light, digestible lunch. Keep coffee to a minimum because it gives only a short energy boost.
- Give yourself enough time to get to the venue if you have to travel.
- Avoid panic talk at the venue before the examination. Keep calm. The more relaxed you are, the more alert you will be. Use breathing techniques before and during the examination (see Section 9.3.3).

9.5.2 During the examination

- Go into the hall, settle in as quickly as possible and avoid distractions. Do not take any notes into the examination venue.
- You are normally given the answering books first. Complete all the information on the cover page (name, identification number, student number and date). Read the rules and regulations. Some exam booklets might specify, for example, that notes should be written only on the inside covers.
- You normally get 10 minutes to read through the exam paper before the official time starts. Be sure to use this time to read through the entire paper—to the final page. Students often find at the end of the session that they have not read the last page on the reverse side. Reading through the whole paper gives you an idea of what you have to do and the time constraints you face.
- Read the instructions. Make sure that you know exactly how many questions there are and how many you are required to answer. Choose questions when you are given a choice: for example, one question in Section A and one in Section B. There is nothing worse than getting to the end of the examination and suddenly realising that you did not answer questions from all the required sections. Make sure that you know which questions are compulsory.
- Jot down keywords next to questions as you read through them. You can then easily add the ones you have forgotten while you answer other questions that might trigger your memory about the topic.
- Look at the marks for each question and allocate time in proportion. Watch the clock and stick to this time frame. If you cannot finish a question in more or less the time allocated, leave enough space for it and go on to the next question. You can always return to complete it if you have time left.
- Locate the ‘easy’ and ‘hard’ questions. Order the questions in sequence for answering. Start with the easy ones. Do not start with the hard ones because it might slow you down and stress you out. Answering the easy questions first will give you confidence. It will help your thinking to flow, and triggers your
memory. This might help you to remember information you need for the difficult questions.

- When answering questions, read the question two or three times carefully and underline keywords and phrases. Analyse the question and take note of the instruction verb (for example, ‘describe’, ‘explain’, ‘evaluate’) and the noun(s). The verb will determine the cognitive level of the question, and the noun the topic or focus. Plan and structure your answer. Jot down points and arrange them in a logical order.

- Start writing your answer in a coherent and systematic way. Markers look for a well-structured and logical answer. Use bullets where necessary. Time is limited. You will have to write fast in order to finish. Do not waste time.

- Write neatly and legibly. Examination markers are human beings who do not have time to figure out what you have written.

- Leave a blank space after each question in case you want to add something later.

- Do not leave the examination room early. Use any time you have left to revise your answers, especially the difficult questions. Try again to answer those that you found difficult when you first attempted them. Use other questions for clues.

- If you are running out of time, never omit a question completely. Write down an outline of how you planned to answer the question, or the remainder of it if you didn't manage to complete it. The points you have jotted down during the reading time will come in handy at this stage.

- Compare the numbers of the questions on the exam paper with those on your answer sheet. Make absolutely sure all the answers are numbered correctly before submitting the answer book.

### 9.5.3 After the examination

Avoid a prolonged post-mortem session outside the exam hall: it is easy to get stressed out when listening to other students. Instead, you should make use of this time to review your exam technique. Use each examination to learn about how you performed and to identify how you can improve in future. Points to consider are:

- Have you revised effectively?
- Did you learn the key topics in such a way that you could recall the facts?
- Did you run out of time?
- Did you understand all the questions?
- Why did you find some questions difficult?
- Where have you wasted time during the exam or preparation?
Reflecting on the last exam you have written is an important part of preparation for the next one. You can develop a new strategy and skills to improve if you can identify what worked for you and what didn't, or where you have wasted time.

**CONCLUSION**

Writing examinations effectively is the final stage of the study process to acquire an academic qualification. This means that all the other stages of the study process – thinking, reading, writing and effective studying – should be in place, so that you are well prepared for the examination.

The most important aspect of exam preparation and writing is planning. Planning starts with effective studying and time management. Planning of time starts at the beginning of the term and becomes more focused in the pre-exam period. Planning of time is also important during the examination itself to ensure that time is spent appropriately according to the allocation of marks, as is planning the answers according to your analysis of the questions.

This links to the analysis of words, the structuring of arguments and the outline of essays. Effective planning and studying lead directly to better examination preparation, and lower levels of stress and anxiety.

**Exercise**

Finding out what you spend your time on is an important exercise when developing a schedule for studying. Complete the following exercise to determine how you spend a typical 24-hour day. Enter the hours you spend on each of the activities listed in the table.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ACTIVITY</th>
<th>HOURS SPENT</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Class attendance</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Studying new work</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Revising the previous day's work</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sleeping</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exercise or sport</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal care and grooming</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meal preparation/eating/cleaning up</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family commitments</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transport and travelling</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Relaxing/TV/video or computer games  
Socialising with friends  
Other  

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TOTAL</th>
<th>24 HOURS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

Use this exercise again when you develop your pre-exam schedule. Determine where you waste time and how you can arrange your daily life to allow sufficient time for studying new work, revising it, completing assignments and studying for tests.

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