

Writing Academic Essays at University

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What is Research?

Video 1

In this video series, I will introduce the basics of writing academic essays. As part of your university studies you will write many reports and term papers. Understanding what is expected in your written assignments is a key to performing well.

First, let's understand the fundamental characteristics of university education. There are three main levels of education: bachelor's degree, master's degree and doctorate. Systems vary from country to country, but a bachelor's degree usually takes three or four years, a master's degree takes one or two years, and a doctorate takes from three to six years. The aim of this process is to take a person from being a student to being a researcher.

In the context of university education, a student is someone who studies. To study means to acquire knowledge, techniques and concepts produced by others. A researcher is someone who researches. To research means to create new knowledge, techniques and concepts.

Your graduation thesis in the final year of your bachelor's degree is usually your first attempt at original research. If you proceed to postgraduate studies, you will write a master's thesis during your master's degree. This is a longer piece of writing and must contain a significant element of original research. A doctoral thesis is usually the length of a book, and it must be a high level piece of original research.

People who want to become academic researchers must convert their theses into academic publications. A doctoral thesis can either be published as a book, or split up into a number of academic articles. A very high quality master's thesis might be good enough to be published as an article. But, a graduation thesis is not typically at the required level for publication. Regardless of your level in the university system, you will also write many papers and reports. These are shorter pieces of work, perhaps to gain credits for a particular course, or perhaps written as first drafts of a longer thesis.

Whatever the length and originality of the piece of writing, they all have something in common. They should follow academic writing conventions. These conventions are the main focus of this video series. In video 2 we will discuss the structure and format of an academic essay. In video 3 we will learn about the style of English you should use in academic writing. In video 4 we will learn how to reference your work properly. And finally in video 5 we will discuss research ethics and using the internet as a research resource.

However, in this first video we are considering the question, what is research? Understanding the nature of research helps you to understand your professors better. They are all researchers as well as teachers. It also helps you to understand where we are trying to take you as students.

It is helpful to think of research in this way. Humans beings have built up a huge body of knowledge over the past few millennia. When you are a student, you choose a little bit of that knowledge and study it intensively. Your reports and papers are all small steps on the path to acquiring that knowledge.

By the time you reach graduate school, you are shifting from study to research. You have begun to understand where the gaps in or

boundaries of our knowledge are. The basic philosophy of the university system is that researchers collectively fill in the gaps and expand our knowledge. This process is never-ending. The more we discover about human society and the universe, the more questions are raised. There will always be a need for more research.

So what does this have to do with your reports and papers that you have to write as undergraduates? Well, from the first day of your university studies you must learn and use the conventions of academic writing. Furthermore, your reports are effectively the first stage of any research project: literature review.

A literature review is when you read the existing research published on a particular topic and then critically analyze it. In addition to your lectures and classes, your professors will ask you to read key texts in the field. You go to the library, read the books or papers, and analyze them in your own essays. When doing a literature review, you should not simply repeat what other people have said. You should try to add your own analysis and interpretation, too. Through reviewing the literature, you learn where the gaps in and boundaries of our knowledge are. Even the most experienced researchers do literature reviews when they start a new project. Think of your reports and term papers, therefore, as practicing one of the most basic academic skills.

Structuring an Essay

Video 2

In this video we look at the structure of an academic essay. While there might be some variations in the detailed structure across different subjects, all academic essays have the same basic structure: title, introduction, main argument, conclusions and bibliography.

The first important part of your essay is the title. Whenever you choose a title, make sure it is a clear, direct title that indicates the topic of your essay. A lot of books - particularly novels, autobiographies and mass market publications - have short, "catchy" titles. But, in the academic world we prefer longer, direct titles. As researchers we want others to find and read our research. The more keywords we have in the title, the easier it is for people to find our research.

Take for example this title, "Female Managers in Japanese and American Financial Organizations". This contains a number of keywords that tell people clearly the content of your paper. By contrast, "She's the Boss: Women in Finance" is a poor title. It might catch your attention more, but it is vague and the keywords give you little indication of the content.

After your title, the first section of any academic essay is the introduction. The introduction plays a number of important roles. It sets the context for your essay, it outlines the aims of your essay, and it tells readers the structure of the arguments that will follow.

In fiction, for example a detective story, it is not good to tell readers the end of the story at the beginning. But in an academic essay, your introduction should tell readers in advance the main arguments or conclusions. A good introduction is also important because “first impressions count”. An engaging introduction will encourage people to read and find out more, while a poor introduction will leave people bored or confused.

It is very difficult to make generalized comments about the structure of the central section of your essay because it will change greatly from subject to subject. If you are writing a scientific research paper or presenting the results of a questionnaire, the paper follows a standard pattern giving your research hypothesis, methodology, results and key findings. If you are writing a social sciences essay, you might divide the essay into sections about different time periods, themes, or case studies. There are many other possibilities. But, whichever structure you use, it should always be very clearly indicated to the reader.

At the end of your essay come the conclusions. There should not be any surprises in your conclusions. Simply repeat the main arguments you have made throughout the essay. If there are new arguments in the conclusions, it can be very confusing for the reader. However, you might want to tell the reader about possible directions for future study. There might be things in your essay that you did not have space or the opportunity to discuss. The issues can be raised in a section of suggestions for future research.

The final section of your essay is the bibliography. We will talk more about the bibliography in video 4, but for now let us simply say that a bibliography is a list of all the materials you have mentioned or cited in your essay.

The final thing to put in your essay is a word count. In academic writing it is very important to write an essay of the length required by your professor, or if you are a professional researcher, by the academic journal. If your professor says "maximum 1,500 words", do not write more than 1,500 words.

There are two reasons for having word counts. The first, which is particularly important for university students, is that it ensures fairness. When professors are marking essays, it is difficult to compare an essay of 5,000 words with an essay of 1,000 words. The second reason is that word counts ensure discipline. The aim of academic writing is not to write a lot, but to write something original and incisive in the limited space available. So, always stick to the word count, and always put a word count at the beginning or end of your essay.

Academic Writing Style

Video 3

In this video we look at academic writing style. Academic writing is a formal, serious form of writing and there are some important conventions to follow. In this video I will introduce you to some of the basic rules and expressions to avoid.

First, let's consider the tone of the writing. In formal writing you should not use casual or rude expressions. Slang, obscene or abusive language should not be used unless they illustrate a specific point within your research. In a paper about youth cultures, for example, you might want to give examples of youth slang; but in the body of a normal academic essay, slang, obscenity and abuse are completely inappropriate.

Furthermore, the tone of your essay should always be respectful. When discussing the work of other researchers in a literature review, never insult people, even if you totally disagree with their arguments. Always discuss their work in a polite, firm manner.

The tone of your essay is also affected by the use of punctuation. In academic writing it is best to avoid abbreviated forms using apostrophes. For example, instead of "don't", use "do not"; instead of "won't", use "will not". You should also avoid punctuation that adds emotions into your writing. Emoticons, such as the smiley, are completely inappropriate. Even exclamation marks at the end of

sentences should be avoided. An exclamation mark in formal writing can contain a very strong nuance of surprise, criticism or sarcasm.

Let's now consider the voice used in your essay. Every academic essay is written by an individual or group of researchers. But, the basic principle of academic writing is that it is calm, objective analysis based on a set of evidence; so, the emotions, personality or opinions of the researchers should be concealed. Personal sentiments introduced by expressions such as "I think that ..." or "In my opinion ..." should be avoided. Instead, impersonal expressions such as "It can be concluded that ..." are more appropriate.

Sometimes you need to refer to yourself in an academic essay, particularly if you are describing your research methodology. For example, let's suppose you carried out a questionnaire survey. You can use one of the following voices: the first person, "I gave out 500 questionnaires", the third person, "The author gave out 500 questionnaires", or the passive voice, "500 questionnaires were given out." The passive voice is typically used in scientific papers, while ethnographical researchers, for example, might use the first person. It is best to ask your professor in your particular field for advice on the most appropriate style.

Another important aspect of writing style is avoiding discriminatory language. There are two particular issues here. The first involves making lazy generalizations about groups of people. So, for example, "The Japanese are hardworking" might be a familiar phrase or image, but it is not entirely true. There are some Japanese people who are not hardworking. It is much better to say something like, "Japanese people have a reputation for being hardworking" or "Many Japanese people are hardworking." Lazy generalizations can easily slide into discriminatory comments.

The second issue is using gender-neutral language. In a lot of older publications, the male pronoun “he” was often used to refer to an individual, male or female, such as in this example: “When an academic writes a paper, he should pay attention to writing style.” Nowadays, this male-centric language is considered inappropriate. You can avoid male-centric language in one of two ways: either by alternating male and female pronouns in such examples, or by using plurals. This gender-neutral language using plurals is best: “When academics write papers, they should pay attention to writing style.”

Finally, do not think that good academic writing style means long, complicated sentences. Sometimes, long sentences are needed to express complex ideas. But as much as possible keep your sentences short, clear and to the point. If you have something new and original to say, it must be in clear language so that others can easily understand your point. Good academic writing style is about effective communication, and not about trying hard to “sound intelligent” by using complicated language.

Referencing Your Work

Video 4

When writing academic essays, you must indicate where you have got your information from by using references. In this video I will introduce you to the basics of referencing your work and compiling a bibliography. There are lots of citation styles, but we will use Harvard, which is one of the most common citation styles in the social sciences.

First of all, let us outline the different types of reference to other people's work.

First you can cite or quote their work. This is when you use exactly the same words as someone else. The other person's work should be enclosed in quotation marks. Second you can paraphrase their work. This is when you say effectively the same thing as someone else but using your own words. Third you can summarize their work. This is when you take somebody else's argument and distill it into a much shorter form. Finally you can simply mention their work. You do not go into detail about the other person's arguments, but you alert readers to the existence of this other literature.

Whichever type of reference you use - quotation, paraphrase, summary or mention - you must state your source using what is called an "in-text reference". In the Harvard citation style, for an in-text reference you give the author, year and page in the body of your essay. There are a few variations on the precise format but this is the

most common: Brackets, surname, year comma, p. and then the page range, close brackets.

Exactly how the reference appears in your text depends on the surrounding sentences. If you do not mention the other author in your sentence, all the reference information appears within the brackets. If you mention the author's name in the sentence, only the year and page range appear in the brackets. Furthermore, there are times when you may drop the page range from your in-text reference. As a basic rule, a quotation should always have the page range, a paraphrase most probably needs a page range, a summary needs a page range if it summarizes a specific section of the other author's work, and a simple mention usually does not require a page range.

When you have finished writing your essay, you should have many in-text references indicating your usage of other people's work. At the end of the essay, include all the works mentioned as in-text references in a references list. The references list gives full bibliographical details of all the works you have referenced. The works are listed in alphabetical order by author surname.

For a book, you must give the following information: author, date, title, place of publication and publisher. For a journal article, you must give the author, date, article title, journal name, volume and page range. There are many other sources that can be used, including newspaper articles, websites, unpublished theses and government documents. Each will have their own particular set of information to be included.

Please note that the references list is only for works mentioned in your essay. So, if you read a book in preparation for an essay, but then did not refer to it using an in-text reference, the book is not included in the references list.

There is one other aspect of referencing your work to mention. Some journals and book publishers ask authors to reference their work using footnotes or endnotes rather than in-text references. An example of a notes-based referencing style is the Chicago Manual of Style. However, in the Harvard system, footnotes or endnotes are only used to give supplementary information that has not been included in the main text.

Referencing your work properly might seem very complicated at first, however, you will quickly get used to it. I have the following four tips to help you master the art of referencing your work.

First, when you are reading any book or article as part of your studies, look carefully at what the author is doing, particularly the way that in-text references are handled. You will gradually pick up a good sense of how to reference your own work.

Second, go to the website of academic journals or book publishers that you read often in your field. There should be a section of the website called "Instructions for Authors". Look at the "Instructions for Authors" to see what experienced researchers are being asked to do.

Third, do an internet search using "Harvard citation style" or "Chicago Manual of Style". There are a number of open access sites explaining these systems in detail. Choose your favourite one, bookmark it in your web browser, and always check you are following the system when you write essays.

Finally, choose one system and stick to it. It can be very confusing if you jump from style to style in different essays. Ultimately what people want is consistency, so that your work looks neat, organized and professional.

Using the Internet as a Research Resource

Video 5

In this last video of the series *Writing Academic Essays at University*, I discuss using the internet as a research resource. This topic acts as a kind of summary for all the previous videos in this series, and also introduces the important issue of plagiarism.

According to the Oxford Dictionary of British English, the definition of plagiarism is “to take the work or an idea of (someone) and pass it off as one’s own”. In practical terms, if you quote, paraphrase or summarize somebody else’s work without providing an in-text reference and listing the source in your bibliography, then you have plagiarized.

Why is this such a problem? Well, in video 1 we learned that research is filling in the gaps or pushing back the boundaries of existing knowledge. The assumption of all academic writing is that either it presents original research results, or that it is literature review. The use of in-text references distinguishes which parts of your text are your own original ideas, and which parts originated somewhere else. If you omit in-text references when you are quoting, paraphrasing or summarizing the work of someone else, it looks like you have done original research when actually you have not. Put more simply, plagiarism is lying or fraud.

The consequences of plagiarism in the academic world are severe. Professional researchers who plagiarize in their published research face two consequences: their publications are withdrawn and they may be dismissed from their jobs. For students, the consequences are also severe. If you have plagiarized in an academic essay, expect to fail your course as the minimum punishment. This might simply mean you cannot get credits for a particular course and have to take it again. But, if you plagiarize in a graduation thesis, expect the university to refuse to let you graduate. Furthermore, every employer who requests an academic transcript of your university education will be told that you cheated. This can destroy your chances of getting a good job.

So, the message is very simple: never, ever quote, paraphrase or summarize other people's work without a proper in-text reference. You do not need endless in-text references for things that are considered "general knowledge". So, saying that World War II ended in 1945 does not require an in-text reference. There are also occasions when, quite by coincidence and with absolutely no malice on your part, you have come to the same conclusions or used exactly the same wording as another researcher. This is not plagiarism as you did not intend to deceive, although as soon as you discover the other person's work you should make references to it in any future essay.

The time when the temptation to plagiarize is greatest is when you are using the internet as a research resource. In the computer age, it is so easy to copy and paste, and in the internet age, vast amounts of information are freely available online. The websites of online news organizations or sites like Wikipedia often contain long sections of text that can easily be copied and pasted into your essays.

Copying and pasting from the internet is not a problem in itself, as long as you give an in-text reference and list the website in your

bibliography. Your open access citation style sheet, which I suggested you should find and bookmark in video 4, should tell you the exact format of an in-text reference for a website. But, the basic principle of referencing online sources is that you should give both the website url and the date you accessed the website.

Writing the access date is very important. Websites and documents on the internet can be changed, moved or deleted at any time. It is highly likely that the webpage you saw, or its url, will not be the same if you access it a year or two later. Writing the access date tells readers when the information you found was available.

To overcome the problem of changed, moved or deleted websites, I strongly suggest the following: create an archive of all webpages that you have used in your research. Print out the webpages, or save them as pdf files, and make a note of the date you do this. Then you have a permanent record of what you saw online and when. If, at a later stage, someone asks you to demonstrate your online source, you can simply show them the print out or pdf from your archive.

There are also many people who use Wikipedia as a basic information source. Wikipedia can be very useful, and even experienced academics use it as a starting point for gathering basic information. But, your professors typically do not like to see Wikipedia used as an in-text reference or main information source. There are two main reasons. The first is that we have no idea who authors Wikipedia pages. It might be a leading expert on that topic, on the other hand it might be someone with very limited knowledge or biased views on that topic. The second is that Wikipedia entries can be edited very frequently. Even if the information is useful, Wikipedia can be a very unstable information source.

I would like to end by summarizing what we have learned in this video series in three main points: First, academic writing is about clearly communicating to others your ideas in formal, written language. Have a clear structure to your essay, and use an appropriate tone and style throughout.

Second, take pride and care in your work. A good way of demonstrating this pride and care is to use professional-looking and consistent formatting.

Finally, use in-text references and a bibliography. Of course, presenting your original ideas and research results is important, but when you have relied on others for concepts and information, always indicate that clearly to your readers.

Developing your academic writing skills is a key to performing well at university. Good luck, work hard, and I wish you all the best in your academic studies.