Learning, Teaching
and Student Engagement

JAMES COOK
UNIVERSITY
AUSTRALIA

Cairns
Singapore
Townsville

English Skills

Writing for your Subjects

This module covers concepts such as

- **Confidently approaching assessment tasks**
- **Identifying some of the main features of academic writing in your discipline**
- **Using high quality written texts as models to develop your own writing**

www.jcu.edu.au/students/learning-centre

TheLearningCentre
UNLOCK YOUR POTENTIAL

Writing for your subjects

Assessment

All of your subjects at university will require you to write. Written assessment tasks provide you with the opportunity to demonstrate and communicate what you have learnt. The expectations of different lecturers will vary. It is essential for every assessment task that you follow your lecturer's instructions meticulously and pay close attention to each assessment criterion provided.

Writing genres

Assessment tasks cover a wide range of genres: essays, business reports, laboratory reports, case studies, annotated bibliographies, literature reviews, reflective writing, wikis, and so on. For most of these genres, your writing should be in academic style: impersonal, precise, qualified, rational and logical. However, be aware of exceptions, such as the use of the first person for reflective writing.

Writing in your discipline

You need to identify some of the features of academic writing in your discipline. For example, is active voice encouraged? Or is passive voice acceptable? Monash University provides a series of useful workbooks that focus on writing in particular disciplines: http://www.monash.edu.au/lls/llonline/writing/index.xml

You may also find discipline-specific dictionaries useful for building your vocabulary.

Read instructions carefully

Always read your assignment instructions carefully. Identify genre, task words, content words and limiting words in your assignment topic.

- **The genre** may be explicitly stated in the assignment title, for example, 'laboratory report', 'essay', or 'literature review'. If not, clarify the writing genre so that you know how your text should be structured.

- **Task words** tell you how to write. Identify task words, such as: discuss, analyse, examine, evaluate, and define. The following resource provides examples of common task words and their definitions: https://libguides.jcu.edu.au/ld.php?content_id=46463221

- **Content words** are the key words that describe what topic you will write about.

- **Limiting words** may limit the extent of your research in terms of time period, location, subjects and so on.

Identify the task words, content words and limiting words in the following topics:

1. Compare the current daily use of technology by three generations of Australians.

2. Write a report on the development of ecotourism in Far North   Queensland.

Read and analyse a text from your discipline

You can use your core texts and peer-reviewed journal articles to help you learn how to write well in your discipline. Look for patterns of language use, textual organisation and academic style in the academic texts you read. Try using the following focus questions to help you analyse the patterns of language use in one of your texts.

Grammar

    a. Which verb tenses are used? Why?
    b. Is the passive voice used?
    c. Select a range of nouns and pronouns. Consider why they are in singular or plural form.
    d. Note how articles (a, an, the) are used or not used.
    e. Find some prepositions (of, about, in, to, with, etc.) in context.

Sentence structure

    a. Note the word order in sentences.
    b. Find a short, simple sentence. Identify the subject, verb (essential) and object.
    c. Find a longer sentence. How many verbs are used? How are the parts of the sentence connected with linking words and punctuation?

Vocabulary

    a. Note any unfamiliar words. Use the context to guess their meaning then verify with a dictionary. Check the pronunciation and usage as well as the meaning.
    b. Can you find any collocations? Collocations are words that are commonly grouped together, e.g. 'brief summary', 'broad range', 'business sector', and 'common characteristics'.
    c. Find examples of linking/transition words or phrases. Note how they make the writing coherent and easy to follow.

Academic Style

    a. Is the writing objective and impersonal? Does the author write in the third person?
    b. Are the author's arguments supported by evidence? Is the evidence verifiable because it is clearly referenced?
    c. Find words of phrases that qualify statements to make them more precise. E.g. The majority of students at university in Australia are conscientious.

Develop your writing

Use your written academic texts and written online resources to develop your own writing. Careful reading and research will lead to focused and accurate writing. With practice, your writing will improve.

In the next workshop, you will be encouraged to identify particular weaknesses in your writing. Please bring some of your writing to the workshop to edit.