

## **ACADEMIC WRITING STYLES – HIGHER LEARNING SKILLS**

### **INTRODUCTION:**

Almost all students find their writing skills improve significantly at university. This is due to the additional practice of writing and the development of more critical awareness by analysing issues from different perspectives.

There is such a lot of writing to do at university that it is worth finding the point of enjoyment in writing as a process. This is easier if:

- You give yourself enough time to write up your work so that you are not always rushing to meet deadlines
- You break writing tasks down into several stages with their own deadlines rather than trying to write the perfect essay or report first time
- You regard writing as a craft, writing several drafts with the aim of making each successive draft better than the previous one
- Familiarise yourself with the style and conventions of your subject
- Pride is taken in producing a piece of writing that is good by the standards of your own subject

### **ACTIVITY 1: In groups of SIX**

- Think back to your schooldays and describe your attitude to writing as a child at school. Why did you write? Who did you write for? How did you learn what was 'right' and 'wrong' about your writing? What messages might have been carried from school into your adult life?
- Think about your course now.....in what ways may your previous school experiences enable or disable your writing on your course? What is your attitude to writing now?

Previous experiences at school:

Seem to have enabled me on this course to .....

Seem to have disabled me on this course by.....

**THE TWO CONCEPTS IDENTIFIED BY ALLEN ET AL. (1989) AS *LEARNING TO WRITE* AND *WRITING TO LEARN* CAN EXPLAIN WHY MANY STUDENTS DO NOT SEE THE VALUE OF WRITING REFLECTIVELY.**

A comparison of the assumptions between the two concepts *learning to write* and *writing to learn* (adapted by Rolfe et al. 2001 from Allen 1989:7)

| <b><i>LEARNING TO WRITE</i><br/>(for others and what they want or expect of you)</b>   | <b><i>WRITING TO LEARN</i><br/>(the process of writing is a way of learning – a combination of thinking and writing)</b>  |
|--|---|
| Students can successfully learn content whether or not they can write well   | Writing is a process through which content is learned or understood (as opposed to memorised or reported)   |
| Writing and thinking involve different skills. Each can, and perhaps should be taught separately                                     | Writing skills are primarily thinking skills (competence in one is inseparable from competence in the other)  |
| Knowing something is logically prior to writing about it   | Writing is a process of developing an understanding or coming to know something   |
| Writing is a sequential, linear activity which involves the cumulative mastery of components like sentence construction or outlining | Writing is a dialectical, recursive process rather than linear or sequential  |
| Communication is the main purpose of writing. Written work is the product in which the student reports what he or she already knows  | Higher order conceptual skills can only evolve through a writing process in which the writer engages in an active on-going dialogue with him or herself and others. Learning and discovery are purposes as important for writing as communication |
| The students audience is most often assumed to be the instructor   | Different disciplines utilise different conceptual processes and thus have different standards for writing. Students can best learn writing within their own disciplines while writing for real concrete audiences                                |

Allen, D.G. Bowers, B. Diekelmann, N. (1989) 'Writing to learn: A Reconceptualisation of Thinking and Writing in the Nursing Curriculum' *Journal of Nursing Education* 28(1):6-11.

Rolfe, G. Freshwater, D. Jasper, M. (2001) (eds.) *Critical Reflection for Nursing and the Helping Professions* Palgrave, Basingstoke, UK p45.

## A COMPARISON OF REFLECTIVE WRITING AND REPORT OR ESSAY WRITING BASED ON MOON (2004)

| <b>REPORT / ESSAY WRITING</b>   | <b>REFLECTIVE WRITING</b>   |
|---|---|
| The subject matter is likely to be clearly defined.   | The subject matter may be diffuse and ill-structured.   |
| The subject matter is not likely to be personal.  | The subject matter may be personal.   |
| The subject matter is likely to be given.   | The subject matter may be determined by the writer.   |
| The purpose of this kind of writing is set in advance, usually fairly precisely in a title / topic              | There may be purpose, but it is more of the nature of a 'container' or direction, not a precise title that predicts the outcome.  |
| Most of the ideas drawn into an essay / report will be predictable and will be determined by the subject matter | Ideas will be drawn into reflective writing from anywhere that the writer believes to be relevant. What is drawn in will be determined by the sense being forged by the writer                              |
| There will be a conclusion  | There may be a conclusion in that something has been learnt, or there may be a recognition of further areas for reflection.   |
| Essays / reports are more likely to be 'one off' – finished and handed in.                                      | Reflective writing may be part of a process that takes place over a period of time.   |
| There is likely to be a clear structure of introduction, discussion and conclusion                              | There is not necessarily a clear structure other than some description at the beginning and some identification of progress made. Structures, such as questions to prompt reflective activity may be given. |
| The writing style is likely to be relatively objective – probably without use of the first person.              | The writing style is likely to be relatively subjective, with involvement of the first person   |
| An essay or report is usually intended to be a representation of learning.                                      | The intention underlying reflective writing is likely to be for the purpose of learning.  |
| An essay / report is likely to be the product of a thinking process, tidily ordered.                            | Reflective writing usually involves the process of thinking and learning, and it is therefore not necessarily 'tidy' in its ordering.   |

## ACTIVITY 2: APPROACHING A WRITING TASK (Cottrell 2003:147):

To plan a piece of writing you would probably take the steps below in the table but not in the order listed. INDIVIDUALLY order how you would be likely to approach writing an assignment

| Steps taken to approach a writing task  | Order of steps |
|---|----------------|
| 1. Decide how you would do better next time                                   |                |
| 2. Make an outline plan   |                |
| 3. Put the ideas in order   |                |
| 4. Research the subject   |                |
| 5. Examine the title and decide what is required                              |                |
| 6. Write a rough draft  |                |
| 7. Take notes from your reading   |                |
| 8. Select the relevant information to include                                 |                |
| 9. Write the final draft  |                |
| 10. Write out the references in full  |                |
| 11. Read through the writing, checking for sense and small errors and correct |                |
| 12. Check if your text is within the word limit                               |                |
| 13. Separate main ideas from supporting detail and examples                   |                |

- Rearrange the steps in the order you would be likely to carry them out
- Consider a second order you could use
- Compare your responses with the sequence lists below;

5 4 7 8 3 13 2 6 12 11 9 10 1

5 4 8 7 3 13 2 6 10 11 12 9 1

Cottrell, S. (2003) (Chapter 7 Writing for university) *The Study Skills Handbook* Palgrave Study Guides Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke, Hampshire, UK, pp143-176.

## **7 POINTS FOR WRITING ASSIGNMENTS (Cottrell 2003:152)**

### **1. CLARIFY THE TASK**

Examine the title and course notes

What exactly is required?

How can the tutor help?

What do you need to read or find out?

### **2. COLLECT AND RECORD INFORMATION**

Be focused on what is needed, be selective

Pose a set of questions and look for the answers

Check the word limit to work out how much information you can use

Where can information be sourced?

Keep notes to jot down ideas, Record information as you go along – references, chapters, journal articles, page numbers etc.

### **3. ORGANISE AND PLAN**

Devise a landscape or chart to link up ideas

Begin to organise information into potential paragraphs

Make an interim plan which can be added to or bits deleted

### **4. EVALUATE THE INFORMATION GATHERED**

What has been found out, are you still within what was asked?

How does your point of view differ from when you started?

Have you clarified your argument?

Have you enough evidence to support your arguments?

What arguments or evidence differ from your own point of view? How valid are these?

Has the task since become clearer?

### **5. WRITE AN OUTLINE PLAN AND FIRST DRAFT TO HELP STRUCTURE THE WRITING**

Work out the order in which to introduce your ideas using headings, mapping or notes

Work out how many words can be written on each section.

Type key headings into the first draft (they can be removed later)

Begin with the section that seems easiest

Keep things going and don't worry about style

State things clearly and in short sentences

Get some feedback from a study buddy or tutor

### **6. WORK ON THE FIRST DRAFT**

Rewrite the early draft and adapt original structure

Organise section headings and writing into paragraphs

Ensure that the arguments put forward are clear

Check that arguments can be supported with evidence and worked examples to illustrate points made

Write out references (and bibliography)

### **7. EDIT THE FINAL DRAFT**

Fine tune the writing

Read over aloud to check that it is clearly written

Ensure the draft meets the assignment guidelines and any outcomes

Ensure a copy is kept of the manuscript

## ESSAY WRITING: RESEARCH BY WORKING TUTORS (ICS 2004)

- How might these comments and the Assignment specifications help you to plan what you are writing?

|   |  |  |   |
|---|--|--|---|
| <b>Answer the question.</b>   | <b>A clear, logical structure is essential.</b>                                | <b>Give your own analysis, not mere description.</b>               | <b>We want to see a fresh, original approach.</b>                                 |
| <b>Clear, consistent references are essential.</b>                                    | <b>Base your essay on extensive relevant reading and research.</b>             | <b>Indecisive 'it's a bit of both' essays are disappointing.</b>   | <b>Argue your case, with your own point of view.</b>                              |
| <b>Use commas properly. Learn how to use semi-colons.</b>                             | <b>We want to see evidence of independent thought.</b>                         | <b>Try to avoid formulas, clichés, and the obvious approaches.</b> | <b>Have a clear, relevant introduction and conclusion.</b>                        |
| <b>It's important to know the difference between "it's" and its alter ego, "its".</b> | <b>Don't allude to anything you've read without giving a reference for it.</b> | <b>Avoid a purely 'journalistic' style, in academic essays.</b>    | <b>Don't waffle. It's not cunning, it just suggests you've got little to say.</b> |
| <b>Illustrate your points with up-to-date examples.</b>                               | <b>Construct your sentences carefully.</b>                                     | <b>Use the internet — but with care and discrimination.</b>        | <b>Don't fill an essay with irrelevant historical detail.</b>                     |
| <b>Use electronic resources to find material (see library website).</b>               | <b>Check your spelling and punctuation. Seriously.</b>                         | <b>Ensure your essay is the required length.</b>                   | <b>Bring the subject to life!</b>   |

Lax, S. (2004) *Essay Writing the Essential Guide* (Institute of Communication Studies University of Leeds) accessed at;  
<http://ics.leeds.ac.uk/icsmodsb/ay2004/STSK1030.pdf> on 5/11/06