Academic and Essay Writing

Student Learning Development
Student Counselling Service
896-1407
student.learning@tcd.ie
https://student-learning.tcd.ie
Academic and Learning Skills resources are available on SLD’s Blackboard ASSL-A-YEAR12-202021

Postgraduate Students
At postgraduate level an even greater emphasis is placed on self-directed learning and the acquisition of academic skills. The thesis is not the end of your study but your first piece of academic work. Completing it is both a contribution to new knowledge and a learning process for you.

Instructions for enrolling on
https://student-learning.tcd.ie
Session objectives

• Link with graduate attributes
• Focus on writing process instead of product
• Look at the phases of writing
• Explore strategies for starting writing earlier
• Understand the importance of structure to an academic essay
• Look at what academic writing is
• Learn about some useful writing resources
Essay Writing Phases

- Planning
- Thinking
- Researching
- Writing
- Editing
## Planning time frame

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>List tasks</th>
<th>Create deadlines</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Preliminaries</td>
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<tr>
<td>Gathering Information</td>
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<tr>
<td>Organising Information</td>
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<tr>
<td>Rough outline</td>
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<td>Draft 1</td>
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<td>Draft 2</td>
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<tr>
<td>References</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proofreading</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

[http://www.kent.ac.uk/uelt/ai/ask/index.php](http://www.kent.ac.uk/uelt/ai/ask/index.php)
Planning the assignment

• Requirements
  – Length
  – Referencing

• Understand the question
  – Breakdown
  – Verbs
Example of Topic

**Examine** the general categories of stressors that can be experienced by an individual at work and **describe** the likely consequences of prolonged stress levels for that individual.

Examine = Present in depth & investigate implications
Describe = set out main aspects of topic or sequence of things
Analyze the assignment

• Write down in your own words what you think the assignment is asking you to do
• What do you already know about the subject matter?
• What information do you need to help you complete the assignment?
• How are you going to choose your reading material?
KEY VERBS

- **ANALYSE** Break an issue down into its component parts; discuss them and show how they interrelate.
- **ARGUE** Make a case, based on appropriate evidence and logically structured, for and/or against some given point of view.
- **ASSESS** Estimate the value or importance of something, paying attention to positive and/or negative aspects.
- **DEFINE** Set down the precise meaning of the word or phrase, giving sufficient detail so as to distinguish it.
- **DESCRIBE** Give a detailed or graphic account.
- **DISCUSS** Investigate or examine by argument; sift and debate giving reasons for and against.
- **EXPLAIN** Tell how things work or how they came to be the way they are.
- **IDENTIFY** Pick out what you regard as the key features of something, perhaps making clear the criteria you use in doing so.
- **ILLUSTRATE** Use a figure or diagram to explain or clarify, or make it clear by the use of concrete examples.
- **OUTLINE** Indicate the main features of a topic or sequence of events, possibly setting them within a clear structure or framework to show how they interrelate.
Thinking

• Initial ideas
• Brainstorm
  – Mind maps
  – Lists
  – Drawings
  – Discussion/Audio
  – Post-it notes
• Preliminary reading
• Initial plan!
Planning - Structure

• Title
• Introduction
  – Background
  – Map of essay
  – Thesis statement
• Body Paragraphs
  – Topics/sub topics
  – Topic Sentences
  – Building Main Points
  – Countering the Opposition
• Conclusion
  – Link to question
  – Summarise main points
  – Recommendations
I. Introduction
   Definitions of Stress
   Views of Stress
   General Categories of Stressor
   Consequences of Stress
   Conclusion

II. Main Point (A) - Views of Stress
   1. Physiological
   2. Psychological
   3. Job Stress
   Summary and identification of categories

III. Main Point (B) - Categories
   1. Organisational
   2. Home-work, Interface, Life stress
   3. Individual
   Evaluation of categories and their impact

IV. Main Point (C) - Consequences
   1. Physical
   2. Behavioural
   3. Psychological
   Summary of impact

V. Conclusion
   Summary of main points and personal conclusions
Reading & Researching

• Use rough **outline** as guide
• Gather information relevant to topic
• Keep good notes
  – Organise content according to outline
  – Choose what to include
• Types of **evidence** to support points?
  – Quotes
  – Tables
  – Paraphrasing
Reading & Researching

- Keep references!
- Digest and reflect on information

Continue your thinking!
Writing

• Start writing early
  – extend outline
  – one idea or section at a time
  – get something down!
• Write first, rough draft
• Revise & improve draft
• How many drafts?
What is a paragraph?

- A group of sentences
- What groups them?
- One idea
- Structure
  - Topic sentence
  - Evidence
  - Analysis/Evaluation
  - Conclusion
  - Transition
Students require more recreational time in order to better focus on lessons in class. (TOPIC SENTENCE)

In fact, studies have shown that students who enjoy a recess of more than 45 minutes consistently score better on tests immediately following the recess period. (SUPPORTING SENTENCE)

Clinical analysis further suggests that physical exercise greatly improves the ability to focus on academic materials. (SUPPORTING SENTENCE)

Longer periods of recess are clearly required to allow students the best possible chances of success in their studies. (CONCLUDING SENTENCE)

Clearly, physical exercise is just one of the necessary ingredients for improving student scores on standardized tests. (Transitional sentence)
Activity

The paragraph below was written in response to the essay question: "Leaders are made rather than born." Do you agree or disagree? Provide reasons for your opinion.

Read the paragraph then answer the question that follows.

Becoming an effective communicator requires an investment in learning and practicing various skills. Even those with strong innate communication abilities will be more confident and present a more polished speech on their twentieth attempt than on their first. It takes time, experience and effort to perfect such a skill. Although there is still debate about what can and cannot be taught, it is evident that potential leaders must understand and consciously develop certain skills.

What is missing from the paragraph? Select the box that applies

- Topic sentence
- Explanation
- Evidence
- Conclusion

https://www.monash.edu/rlo/research-writing-assignments/assignment-types/writing-an-essay/writing-body-paragraphs
Academic Writing
Writing in an academic way

• Formal
• Being critical and analytical
• Using language in a precise & subject-specific way - jargon
• Adopting a position - thesis
• Drawing on and citing a range of authors & arguments
• Acronyms
• Remaining objective
Activity 1

Read the following sentence from a student’s essay:

*Articles on women's sports were placed on the left page and often at the bottom, which is a place skipped by many readers.*

Which two sentences below express the same idea using more formal language?

- Articles on women’s sports were placed on the left page, often at the bottom, which is an area most readers jump over.
- Articles on women's sports were placed on the left page. often at the bottom, which is an area often overlooked by readers.
- Articles on women's sports were placed on the left page, often at the bottom, which is a less prominent position.

[Link](https://www.monash.edu/rlo/research-writing-assignments/writing/features-of-academic-writing/academic-language)
Using the pencil icon, highlight the issues with this writing

Academic Writing

A lot of people think that the weather is getting worse. They say that this has been going on for quite a long time. I think that they are quite right. Research has shown that we now get storms etc all the time.

https://slideplayer.com/slide/9992367/
A lot of people think that the weather is getting worse. They say that this has been going on for quite a long time. I think that they are quite right. Research has shown that we now get storms etc all the time.

https://slideplayer.com/slide/9992367/
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Passage</th>
<th>Problem</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A lot of people think…</td>
<td>Imprecise – how many is ‘a lot’?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>…the weather…</td>
<td>Imprecise – ‘weather’ is a short term concept</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>…getting worse…</td>
<td>Informal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>They say…</td>
<td>Imprecise pronoun</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>…going on…</td>
<td>Informal phrasal verb</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>…quite a long time.</td>
<td>Imprecise – how long is this?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I think…</td>
<td>Informal - personal pronoun</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research…</td>
<td>Vague – whose research?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>…we now get…</td>
<td>Informal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>…storms, etc…</td>
<td>vague</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>…all the time.</td>
<td>Overgeneralized</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Re-written:

Experts widely believe that the climate is deteriorating. Climatologists claim that this process has been continuing for nearly 100 years. McKinley (1997) appears to support this belief, demonstrating a 55% increase in the frequency of severe winter gales since 1905.

https://slideplayer.com/slide/9992367/
Use of plastics in the environment

Academic Text

• ‘Plastics offer considerable benefits for the future, but it is evident that our current approaches to production, use and disposal are not sustainable and present concerns for wildlife and human health...There are solutions...There is a role for individuals, via appropriate use and disposal, particularly recycling’ (Thompson, Moore, Vom Sall & Swan 2009)

• [https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2873021/](https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2873021/)

Non-Academic Text

• I think it’s very important that everyone should think about using plastic in the environment. It’s really bad and needs to be stopped but it’s like there’s no tomorrow as far as some people are concerned. There should be a lot more done to stop them using plastic.
What is critical writing?

• Argument
  – Evaluate & weigh up ideas
  – State different points of view
  – Consider available evidence
  – Possible counter arguments
  – Claim that is proven throughout the paper

• Opinion
  – One point of view
  – Lack of supporting evidence
  – Personal feelings and views
What is an argument?

- Not a ‘debate’ or ‘dispute’
- Doesn’t just apply to ‘argumentative’ type essays

✓ A set of claims with evidence that support a particular point of view
✓ The driving force / the backbone of your essay
Assertion versus Argument

Assertion/Opinion
Between 1945 and 1980, the Australian Senate prevented the Labor Party from governing effectively by persistently failing to pass important legislation.

Supported Statement
Between 1945 and 1980, the Australian Senate prevented the Labor Party from governing effectively by persistently failing to pass important legislation (Brown, 28; Smith 36-6).

Argument
Between 1945 and 1980, the Australian Senate prevented the Labor Party from governing effectively by persistently failing to pass important legislation. For instance, in 1974 the Senate blocked eighty pieces of important legislation (Smith, 23). McGuire’s analysis of Senate voting between 1950 and 1980 shows that the Senate blocked 850 Labor bills but only five of the non-Labor party bills (41).

(From Dunn, 2007, p. 7)
Steps in constructing your argument

• Analyse topic
• Write down your working thesis
  – Your point of view in relation to topic
  – Keep thesis prominent
• Organise your argument
• Develop argument
• Document points and claims
• Reference or bibliography
Develop your argument

• Use source material
• Compare and contrast
• Show awareness of complexities
• Show line of reasoning
  – link points
  – central guiding line
• Your conclusions - based on evidence
Counterarguments

• **What are they?** Evidence against your thesis statement or supporting points

• **Why include them?** To show you have considered all sides of the essay question

• **How do I write about them?** State the opposing claim then refute or show why your argument betters it

**Example:** “An obstacle to the expansion of solar energy is the initial expense of setting up an industry to collect, store, and distribute solar energy. However, despite this initial expense, the expansion of solar energy is worth investing in because...”

Adapted from tutorial.dasa.ncsu.edu
Structure your argument

- Reasons for and evidence/Reasons against and evidence
- Compare & contrast
- Outline of points, charts, diagrams

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Areas to be compare and contrast</th>
<th>A</th>
<th>B</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Similarities</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td>2</td>
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<td>Differences</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Significance of these</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Conclusion:
## Descriptive Vs Critical Writing

### Descriptive
Summarises what other people have found without saying what these findings mean for your investigation. Usually a chronological list of who discovered what, and when.

### Analytical
**Synthesises** the work and succinctly **passes judgement** on the relative merits of research conducted in your field. Reveals limitations or recognises the possibility of taking research further, allowing you to formulate and justify your aims for your investigation.

### For example:
"Green (1975) discovered ...."
"In 1978, Black conducted experiments and discovered that ...."
"Later Brown (1980) illustrated this in ......"

### For example:
There seems to be general agreement on x, (see White 1987, Brown 1980, Black 1978, Green 1975). However, Green (1975) sees x as a consequence of y, while Black(1978) puts x and y as .... While Green's work has some limitations in that it ...., its main value lies in ...."
Introduction

A major change that has occurred in the Western family is an increased incidence in divorce. Whereas in the past, divorce was a relatively rare occurrence, in recent times it has become quite commonplace. This change is borne out clearly in census figures. For example thirty years ago in Australia, only one marriage in ten ended in divorce; nowadays the figure is more than one in three (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 1996: p.45). A consequence of this change has been a substantial increase in the number of single parent families and the attendant problems that this brings (Kilmartin, 1997).

This essay will seek to critically examine a number of sociological explanations for the 'divorce phenomenon' and also consider the social policy implications that each explanation carries with it. It will be argued that the best explanations are to be found within a broad socio-economic framework.
How to improve your writing

• Academic texts – your recommended books, articles
• Peer feedback, share writing
• Good resources online – SLD Blackboard module
• Other?
Signposting your line of reasoning
In large gene families with tandem repeats, as is the case for nrDNA, unequal crossing-over may be more important than gene conversion in the concerted evolution process (Li, 1997). For example, the number of repeats can fluctuate without having any adverse effects. With a larger number of repeats being exchanged, the rate of concerted evolution increases as well. Correspondingly, homogeneity increases as the number of repeats increases. Rate then increases as homogeneity among the copies increases, leading to a self-feeding repetition. As a result of this process, it is believed that nrDNA is found in up to thousands of copies in the nuclear genome (Baldwin et al., 1995).
1.7 Phylogenetic Utility of the Internal Transcribed Spacer

Several factors make the ITS region valuable for use in phylogenetic analyses (Baldwin et al., 1995). First, the ITS region is highly repeated in plant nuclear genomes, along with other components of the nrDNA multigene family including a highly variable region between the ribosomal repeat, the intergenic spacer. The high copy number of the nrDNA repeat facilitates the amplification and sequencing of the nrDNA.

Secondly, the nrDNA multigene family undergoes rapid concerted evolution as described above (Baldwin et al., 1995). This property of the ITS region is most important from a phylogenetic standpoint and promotes accurate reconstruction of species relationships from sequencing. However, non-homologous copies are occasionally present with point mutations and/or insertion/deletion events, causing small variation among the copies within a species.

Lastly, the ITS region is relatively small (ca. 700 bp) and is flanked by highly conserved sequences, the 18s and 26s nrDNA genes (Baldwin et al., 1995). Because of this, universal primers can be used to amplify and sequence the ITS region. Primers were originally designed for amplification of fungal rRNA and derived from sequences of fungi (Saccharomyces), animals (Drosophila), and plants (Oryza sativa and Hordeum vulgaris) (White et al., 1990). These primers have been used successfully with members of the Liliaceae, Asteraceae, and Araliaceae.
Tip – make every sentence count

“The story makes an interesting comparison between the upper and lower classes”

Filler sentence without specific information. Add **why** you consider the comparison interesting.

**Explain** what makes your argument or topic interesting!

**So What??**
Referencing

Why?

• Credit sources of information & ideas
• Reader can locate for further information if required
• Demonstrate breadth of reading & knowledge
• Shows evidence is research based
• To avoid plagiarism
References

When?

- Direct quotes
- Paraphrases/sumarising
- Tables, figures
- Images, photos, graphs
- Statistics/Studies
- Theories
- Interpretations
- Facts
Plagiarism

• Using someone’s words or ideas and presenting them as your own (Marshall & Rowland, 1998)
• Inappropriate use of ideas from books, articles, internet, or other students’ work
• [http://tcd-ie.libguides.com/plagiarism](http://tcd-ie.libguides.com/plagiarism)
Editing

• Proof read
  – out loud
  – time out
  – peer
• Write up references
• Final draft
  – Presentation
• Submit
ACADEMIC WRITING

More examples
Characteristics of Academic Writing

- Formal – no contractions, colloquialism
- Unambiguous – can’t be misinterpreted
- Explicit – don’t leave reader guessing
- Critical vs descriptive
- Evidence based – supported by research, refs
- Objective vs biased
- Precision – facts/numbers- X degrees not ‘extremely hot’
- Third person?
- Complexity
- Hedging – how sure are you?
- Jargon
Formal

• I just want to explain
• The purpose of this essay is to explain
• Avoid colloquialisms/slang: lashing rain, at the end of the day, roaring his head off
• No contractions: don’t, can’t, won’t
• Do not, cannot, will not
Third person vs First person

**Third person**
- It has been found...
- Brown discovered that...
- The importance of has been demonstrated by ...

**First Person**
- I believe that ...
- I think it is more important that ...
Precise Vs vague

**Precise**
- 75%
- The majority
- 9/10ths
- Three studies
- 45 respondents
- In Ireland
- In Dublin
- In July 1945

**Vague**
- A lot of
- Everyone
- Loads
- It always
- A few years ago
- In Africa
Ambiguous vs clarity

Ambiguous/Unambiguous?

• They’re having a barbecue in the garden behind the house they are renting next Saturday at 8.

• (They’re only renting the house at eight o’clock?)

Ambiguous/Unambiguous?

• They’re having a barbecue next Saturday at 8 in the garden behind the house they are renting.

https://annehodgson.de/2011/06/01/practice-academic-writing-skills-2-ambiguity/
Concise vs verbose

Wordy

• For each and every book you purchase, you will receive a free bookmark.

• The reason for the failure of the basketball team of the University of North Carolina in the Final Four game against the team from Kansas was that on that day and at that time, some players were frequently unable to rebound the ball.

Concise

• For every book you purchase, you will receive a free bookmark.

• UNC’s basketball team lost the Final Four game against Kansas because it could not consistently rebound the ball.

[https://writingcenter.unc.edu/tips-and-tools/conciseness-handout/](https://writingcenter.unc.edu/tips-and-tools/conciseness-handout/)
Evidence based - objective

**Objective**
- Based on evidence
- Reliable information
- Referenced appropriately

**Subjective**
- Opinion based
- No scientific evidence
- Unreliable evidence
- Not referenced
Websites/resources

- http://www.learningdevelopment.plymouth.ac.uk/wrasse/ sample essays
- http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/679/01/ general advice & grammar
- http://www.phrasebank.manchester.ac.uk academic phrases
- http://www.kent.ac.uk/uelt/ai/ask/index.php
- http://vimeo.com/44666462 paragraphs
- Dunn, R. (2007). James Cook University, personal communication
Feedback, please!

https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/general20-21