

Page 58

Writing skills multiple choice questionnaire

Page 59

Read Suzanne Taylor's practice profile on chronic pain

Page 60

Guidelines on how to write a practice profile

Developing academic writing skills: the PROCESS framework

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Summary

Academic writing is an important aspect of professional development for students and lecturers. It is one way in which they demonstrate their learning, but it can be a difficult skill to master. This article aims to enable students and professionals to develop their academic writing style using a coherent and effective framework.

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Aims and intended learning outcomes

The aim of this article is to enable students and professionals to develop their academic writing style using a coherent and effective approach that demonstrates scholarly and professional development. After reading this article you should be able to:

- ▶ Plan an academic piece of work for further development.
- ▶ Reference information appropriately throughout the text.

- ▶ Organise your assignment in a logical order.
- ▶ Compose or structure your assignment coherently, identifying key components.
- ▶ Develop an academic style of writing that is fit for purpose.
- ▶ Demonstrate professional maturity by using appropriate grammar and spelling.
- ▶ Structure and present your academic work in an effective and aesthetic format.

Introduction

In the UK, academic writing is often the process or method and outcome of a student's time in higher education and yet many students – and lecturers – would agree that it can be the most difficult part of learning and studying (Pelias 2003). This is an ongoing problem. *The Daily Telegraph* reported that 'New Cambridge students can't write English' (Clare 2002), while the *Guardian* described academic language as so convoluted and obscure that most people will not, or cannot, read it (McCarthy 2006). Students and lecturers become frustrated when they do not understand academic writing (Whitehead 2002).

This article aims to demystify academic writing for students and professionals. Some authors provide guidance on particular components identified but this article aims to explore the whole process. The acronym 'PROCESS' is provided as a mnemonic or way of helping the writer to remember the more important stages of academic writing, which should include: Planning, Referencing, Organisation, Composition, Engineering, Spelling and Structure (Box 1).

Time out 1

Many students fail to analyse previous submissions when writing their next assignment and feedback remarks are either not read or written too vaguely to be of any use. Find a previous assignment that has been marked and see if you have addressed all the stages suggested in the PROCESS framework. Make a note of what you have found to be your strengths and weaknesses and discuss these with your tutor.

Planning

Students who fail assignments often have not planned their work adequately, which may result in an incoherent text no matter how many references are included. Planning involves spending time thinking about the main points of the assignment and discussing them with a tutor or critical friend. It is important to get into the habit of planning and organising work early. Clay (2003) suggests that planning may help overcome 'writer's block' and encourages the student to think about how the assignment relates to the module learning outcomes.

A plan is a basic outline and it does not need to be presented as an assignment or chapter because busy tutors do not have time to read it. A plan is a

group of significant words or statements linked together to form the basis of a comprehensive discussion of the topic. Mind Tools (2006) is a useful online resource that helps people in education and business to organise their thoughts quickly, which is the main aim of planning.

Once a plan has been made and agreed with your tutor or supervisor, it should not require much change and can be used to focus the proposed assignment. The plan will also guide writers to where they might need to start reading and gathering information. This avoids the tendency to become distracted by other more personal interests. Therefore, the initial plan will include a basic outline of what the assignment requires and how it might look when finished; this can then be developed further. However you decide to record your plan, make sure it is available to refer back to. Referring to the plan will help you to stay focused and prevent you becoming overwhelmed by the literature. This is a common problem for research students who need to carry out a literature review, which at this stage will also consist of identifying keywords to use to search the literature. Identifying keywords might be a useful approach for students who wish to explore the academic literature, as different assignments will have different requirements to be met depending on the level to be achieved (Box 2). Sources will include journals, books, databases, electronic literature and search engines (Beecroft *et al* 2006). Becoming familiar

BOX 1

Overview of the stages of the PROCESS framework

- 1. Planning** Planning can save time and energy when meeting your tutor. Some universities limit the number of tutorials so it is wise to be as well prepared as possible before booking a tutorial so you can make the best use of the time. Preparation might include reading the assignment guidelines.
- 2. Referencing** Referencing begins when you start to gather information. Referencing does not merely constitute a list at the end of the assignment but should be used throughout the piece of work and needs to be thought through from the beginning, in relation to referencing guidelines produced by each institution.
- 3. Organisation** Organisation of the information gathered at the referencing stage will enable students to start developing their plan into a structured format and help them focus on the topic. This is where students will generate ideas from what they have read and begin to formulate their assignment from these ideas.
- 4. Composition** Composition of ideas is awarded marks according to different levels required in the course or module the student is studying (Box 2). An understanding of the levels enables students to compose their ideas to the required level and produce a robust piece of work. In each level there will also be grade-related criteria. Students should be provided with a copy of the grade-related criteria in their course handbooks.
- 5. Engineering** Engineering is a term used to describe how students might go about effectively drawing together their ideas (Biggs *et al* 1999). Engineering therefore requires reflection on the planning, referencing, organisation and composition stages to explore their effectiveness.
- 6. Spelling** Spelling and grammar in an assignment allow the reader to understand the concepts and ideas presented by students and to identify students' understanding of the subject. Poor grammar and spelling in any piece of written work demonstrate a lack of care and attention, and may confuse the reader and obscure the message.
- 7. Structure** The structure of the work demonstrates the care and thought that have gone into its presentation. This is the last stage before submission but it is necessary to ensure that the assignment has been proofread for errors and typing mistakes. The student may also decide to alter the structure to improve the flow of ideas. Assignment guidelines may also state specific requirements, for example, margins, word length, line spacing and font.

with the variety of sources available will also help students to access information quickly.

Time out 2

Consider the following when planning a piece of academic work and discussing it with your tutor:

1. What are the requirements for the assignment?
2. What module learning outcomes are being assessed in the assignment?
3. What areas of practice do I want to focus on?
4. How will this fit with the assignment guidelines?
5. What sources will I be using to gather information?

Referencing and citations

Many people find referencing difficult because there are various ways in which it can be done. In the author's experience some students have suggested that they would rather spend time on the content of the assignment than on the references. This approach suggests that students are not aware that referencing in the text is included in the marking of the assignment and can lead to a poor grade or even failure if neglected. Poor referencing spoils the presentation of the work and the argument that is being conveyed.

Referencing includes not only the list produced at the end of an assignment but also the way information is gathered and ideas are referenced in the text. The risk of plagiarism or using other people's work without acknowledgement is increased when ideas have not been properly referenced. This might include cutting and pasting whole texts and/or paragraphs, or paraphrasing without citing the author of the original text. Confusion can arise about when to reference, but generally any idea that is not the student's must be referenced throughout the text (Johnston 2003). It is therefore important to check that references are used appropriately and written correctly in the text.

Many universities provide referencing guidelines, which should be carefully followed before submission of the assignment. The Harvard method is popular with universities and includes advice on when and where to place the name of the author(s), date, title of article or book, where it was published and who by. In the reference list, page numbers are usually required for an article or a chapter in a book. Similarly, author(s) and date are required for all references in the assignment and page numbers are required for quotations. Middlesex University provides a useful guide to referencing and citations that includes Harvard referencing guidelines, which are commonly used in the UK (Roberts 2006).

When an assignment is well referenced, it demonstrates the student's commitment to a good standard of academic writing and provides information required by the tutor. A well-referenced work will also provide evidence of where writers have obtained their ideas and how

BOX 2

Academic levels adapted from the Quality Assurance Agency (2001) framework

Level of study indicator for a certificate of higher education (Level 4) Students will need to demonstrate their knowledge of background concepts in relation to their area of study. Students are also expected to demonstrate their understanding and interpretation of research evidence and develop arguments from the literature to support or refute such evidence. This level is mainly descriptive in analysing current perspectives.

Level of study indicator for a qualification at intermediate (diploma) level (Level 5) Students will need to demonstrate their knowledge and interpretation of evidence-based principles in practice. Students are also expected to demonstrate their understanding of the wider context and the methods of enquiry in current research-based evidence. This level requires some discussion in analysing current and wider perspectives.

Level of study indicator for a qualification at honours level: bachelor's degree with honours (Level 6) Students will need to demonstrate a clear understanding of the main aspects of their area of study. Students will therefore be required to critically analyse current practice and methods of enquiry and develop substantial arguments from the literature.

Level of study indicator for a qualification at master's level: master's degree (Level 7) Students wishing to attain this level must demonstrate substantial awareness of current evidence-based practice and an ability to inform their area of practice. The student will therefore be required to demonstrate an ability to carry out and critically evaluate different research methodologies and techniques in formulating an application of knowledge to practice.

Level of study indicator for a qualification at doctoral level: doctoral degree (Level 8) Students studying at this level must demonstrate their understanding of existing knowledge and the creation of new knowledge to develop original research relevant to their area of practice. Students must demonstrate the ability to generate new ideas and to implement complex research techniques to satisfy a review by colleagues in the field.

they have expanded on the work of others, which is a good indicator for overall marks awarded. Good referencing therefore provides evidence that students are working towards the required level for their award, and demonstrate their improved knowledge.

Time out 3

If you are not sure how to present or reference an assignment refer to published articles as a guide. While carrying out your analysis, look for the following:

- ▶ How has the information been set out in the main body and the reference list?
- ▶ How are quotations referenced?
- ▶ Are secondary sources referenced appropriately?
- ▶ How have the author(s) referenced articles in the text, and in the reference list?

Organisation

An assignment to be read by tutors should be organised into an acceptable style and format. It is worth thinking about who will read the assignment before organising it into different sections. For example, tutors, supervisors and mentors may have different requirements for areas such as the use of headings. Organisation is the systematic process of academic writing where you begin to combine different aspects of the work. Cutting and pasting in an electronic document can make this process easier but some experienced writers and researchers prefer to work by hand, on the floor or a large table, with cut-up pieces of their notes. The Online Writing Lab (OWL 2006) at Purdue University, Indiana, provides handouts on every aspect of writing assignments from planning to referencing using Modern Language Association (MLA) formatting for humanities and the arts assignments, or American Psychology Association (APA) formatting for social sciences assignments. Publishing companies also require these methods of formatting so it is good practice to get into the habit of acceptable presentation.

During the planning stage, you will have outlined the structure of your assignment. At this stage you are starting to think about how you will fit all your ideas together to form a coherent discussion or argument. Each idea should be written in a paragraph and each paragraph linked to the next idea in the discussion. This makes up the main body in shorter assignments. In longer assignments, such as dissertations and theses, the paragraphs will be linked together in chapters. You may also at this stage decide to exclude some ideas or find that you need to read more about a

particular area. It is useful, halfway through your work, to revisit your plan and have a discussion with your tutor to confirm that you are still on the same path that you started on. Some students and tutors prefer to use headings to help guide the reader through the text; however, if too many are used the work will appear fragmented and disjointed. You will need to discuss with your tutor the preferred layout for each particular assignment and agree on any personal preferences. A well-organised assignment may not need headings if each paragraph is properly linked to the next. You might want to think of organising your assignment as you would a journey: identifying the starting and finishing points, with focal points along the way. The focal points will be informed by what you have read, just as a tour guide provides chunks of information at each stop. Learning to write short paragraphs that can be joined up later to form the whole assignment can be difficult. Writing annotated bibliographies (Box 3) can help with this process and encourage a disciplined approach to note taking (Stacks and Karper 2001). If you can learn to rewrite information in your own words you will avoid some of the pitfalls of plagiarism.

Time out 4

Learning to write annotated bibliographies is a skill that will support your assignment organisation in a speedy and factually correct way. It is a form of note taking but is more than a summary of the content. To develop this skill you will need to find an article from a journal and write the following information in about 100-200 words:

1. The title and full reference of the article.
2. The overall design of the article: was it an original research article, a theoretical discussion or an opinion piece?
3. The overall findings of the article (this can be descriptive and/or critical).
4. How does this link to other articles you have read?

Composition levels

Many students do not know the difference between the different levels of composition in academic writing (Box 2). The level descriptors or indicators should also correspond with the module learning outcomes. These identify the required level of understanding that must be attained on a particular course, which is recommended by quality review bodies. They include words that identify the activity of study required for each academic level. All students

BOX 3

Example of an annotated bibliography

Lloyd M, Carson A (2005) Culture shift: carer empowerment and co-operative inquiry. *Journal of Psychiatric and Mental Health Nursing*. 12, 2, 187-191.

This article reports on an original piece of research, which used co-operative inquiry as a research method in an action research framework. The researcher uses a reflective approach to the research that involved carers of mental health service users as co-researchers in the design and implementation of the project. An information pack was produced on completion of the research which identified information needs in the following areas: Statutory and Voluntary Agencies, Understanding Mental Illness, Helping yourself and the Law and your Rights. This article provides a useful overview of this methodology and identifies the difficulties that might be encountered when using this method such as the research experience of the co-researchers. This issue is also highlighted in Lowes L, Hulatt I (2005) *Involving Service Users in Health and Social Care Research*. Routledge, London.

usually understand the words ‘describe’ and ‘discuss’ but moving up towards degree level and beyond the descriptors become more abstract. Presenting a balanced argument through ‘critical analysis’ or ‘evaluation’ in an assignment requires skill and practice and is an essential component of academic writing.

Gocsik (2005) provides guidance on how to ensure that an argument is logical and supports the subject of the assignment. For example, it would be untrue to say that all people who smoke will get cancer. Although there is much evidence of the links between the two, the student would need to provide evidence to support the case that all people who smoke get cancer. Consequently, the discussion would need more depth, depending on the level at which the student was studying.

Whitehead (2002) observed that students found developing academic writing skills troublesome, and some students stated that they only knew enough to pass. This demonstrates the difficulty many students find in attaining the levels of critical thinking required by course tutors and their profession. However, students are not alone in having doubts about their academic writing skills. Murray (2001) found that tutors also harbour these doubts and with the increasing pressure on them to write for publication, tutors identified similar process

components such as planning, organisation and discussion as helpful.

If an assignment requires discussion of original literature that includes research then additional requirements are expected (Box 2). These requirements can be found in many research books and usually fall under the heading of ‘How to conduct a literature review’. A comprehensive list of steps in a literature review is often provided under this section that will guide the student. Beecroft *et al* (2006) suggest two models to help students remember this part of the process – the PICO model (Stone 2002) and the SPICE model (Beecroft *et al* 2006). The PICO model sets out areas for critical analysis/discussion of the research such as the components of Patient/Problem, Intervention, Comparison and Outcome, while the SPICE model sets out the components of Setting, Perspective, Intervention, Comparison and Evaluation. These models enable the student to remember the research process, which will encourage a full and balanced discussion at each academic level.

Time out 5

You now have three outlines of writing brief notes depending on the composition level or indicator required for your level of study. Using an article you have found in the previous stages write a brief passage using the annotated bibliography model, the PICO model or the SPICE model. You may find you have a personal preference for one model. This should not be a problem because you are developing your writing style. However, in the early stages of developing your own style you should consult your tutor about whether the model is appropriate for use in a particular assignment.

Engineering and other writing styles

Students will have their own way or system of learning and writing, however, the outcome of a credible piece of work should always be of the same professional standard. Biggs *et al* (1999) suggest that some students read excessively then write or ‘engineer’ their assignment the week before submission with little alteration to grammar and spelling and others start writing early but rewrite continuously or ‘sculpture’ so that the finished version is nothing like the original. Other students will develop variations on these themes (Biggs *et al* 1999). The finished product should be a carefully constructed piece of work and students should become aware of their individual writing and learning styles and develop or change their styles appropriately to meet the

requirements of the course or institution. Biggs *et al* (1999) identify other styles such as 'planners' who are similar to engineers, 'revisers' who are similar to sculptors and 'mixed' where students use a mixture of the two approaches. Awareness of these individual writing styles allows writers to change their style or continue as they are, but it will also have an influence on the planning and organisation stages of writing as students who are less organised in their approach may need to improve on this area of academic writing. Whitehead (2002) found that students felt that they had little skill in academic writing and any offer of support occurred early in their course. It could be suggested therefore that students need to acquire a reflective approach (Murray 2001) to developing academic writing, similar to how they develop other skills during higher education courses. Other authors have suggested that writing retreats and groups have been supportive and beneficial to some academic writers (Moore 2003).

Time out 6

Reflect on the last assignment that you wrote and consider how you engineered the assignment. Were you comfortable with the approach you took or will you do it differently next time? What approach will you choose next time – engineer, sculptor, planner, reviser or mixed and why? Use this reflection as a discussion point with your tutor.

Spelling and structure

Every student will have his or her own style of writing but academic writing aims to modify individual styles and present a uniform style or standard that will address academic requirements. This may mean specific wording or terminology is required to comply with educational and/or professional standards. The Academic Phrasebank (Morley 2005) produced by the University of Manchester provides examples of acceptable academic language. The use of correct spelling and grammar will enhance the presentation of the document and demonstrate the student's understanding of the subject. There are many online dictionaries available but investing in your own copy will not be money wasted.

Poor grammar is a problem in higher education where many students are unable to construct proper sentences and paragraphs. This is perhaps a legacy of the revised under 16 curriculum: the burden on tutors of correcting students' poor grammar is increasing (Whitehead 2002).

It is important to identify problems with grammar early and to seek appropriate support. For example, in many universities basic writing composition support is often available to students who use English as a second language (Biggs *et al* 1999), which could also be used to support any student who finds academic writing difficult. In addition, many higher and further education organisations offer to screen students for learning difficulties such as dyslexia, which may not have been diagnosed during earlier education. Students who are found to have needs in this area will be offered support under the Special Educational Needs and Disability Act 2001 (Department of Health 2001). This act requires that all students with a recognised disability are treated equally regardless of their disability.

The structure of the assignment will depend on adequate planning at previous stages of the process, however, students are often confused about whether they should write in the third person, for example, 'the author found that' or the first person, for example, 'I found that'. While this may be a question of personal taste on the part of the student and/or the tutor, students at levels 4, 5 and 6 (Box 2) are usually encouraged to write in the third person.

After finishing your assignment you should proofread the whole document to ensure that spelling mistakes and grammatical errors are removed. In addition, you should be able to identify whether the assignment has been organised according to your original plan and if anything has been omitted. In particular, you will be able to gauge whether there are too many quotations, which can make the work seem fragmented and show little original thought. Work can also be fragmented if too many lists or bullet points are used instead of discussion of a concept.

Most assignments require an introduction and a conclusion. The introduction will help you to set the scene for the reader and outline the context and the content of the assignment. If readers have to find their own way, they may overlook important information and the student will receive a lower mark. In your introduction you should outline the aim of the assignment and conclude by demonstrating how you have achieved this (Roberts 2006).

The presentation of the assignment demonstrates the care taken in its construction. In the final draft, the student will need to ensure he or she has followed organisational guidelines for page numbers, word counts, margins and line spacing. The presentation of the assignment will allow students to demonstrate that they can follow instructions and are committed to taking care of their own professional development.

Time out 7

Learning to proofread your own work can take some discipline because, if you are immersed in the subject you are studying, you may not see the errors. Proofreading will, however, help you detect some of the grammatical and spelling errors that are not always picked up by a computer spell-checking program.

1. Read a recent assignment for spelling and grammatical errors without attending too much to the content.
2. Then ask someone who is not on the same course as you to read it – this could also be an adult member of your family – and compare your findings. They will often ask you to clarify some point or see errors that you have not.
3. Read your work aloud to yourself. This will highlight long and meaningless sentences that you can quickly correct.
4. Look at your paragraphs. Do they analyse one idea? If not they may need to be reworded.

This article has developed a framework for academic writing that provides an overview of the components expected when assignments are submitted for marking. It is important that the student has a clear understanding of the process. Academic assignments demonstrate not only the level students have achieved in their learning but also their commitment to their subject as a professional endeavour. The PROCESS framework helps students to assess their work before submission and provides a format for tutorial discussions. The components – Planning, Referencing, Organisation, Composition, Engineering, Spelling and Structure – have been identified and discussed. Assignments are not the only forms of assessment, but are also frequently used to assess learning. Therefore, understanding the academic writing process enables students to develop their skills in this area **NS**

Time out 8

Now that you have completed the article you might like to write a practice profile. Guidelines to help you are on page 60.

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Academic writing

TEST YOUR KNOWLEDGE AND WIN

A £50 BOOK TOKEN

HOW TO USE THIS ASSESSMENT

This self-assessment questionnaire (SAQ) will help you to test your knowledge. Each week you will find **ten multiple-choice questions which are broadly linked to the learning zone article.**

Note: There is only one correct answer for each question.

Ways to use this assessment

- ▶ You could test your subject knowledge by attempting the questions before reading the article, and then go back over them to see if you would answer any differently.
- ▶ You might like to read the article to update yourself before attempting the questions.

The answers will be published in *Nursing Standard* two weeks after the article appears.

Prize draw

Each week there is a draw for correct entries. Send your answers on a postcard to: Nursing Standard, The Heights, 59-65 Lowlands Road, Harrow, Middlesex HA1 3AW, or via email to: zena.latcham@rcnpublishing.co.uk

Ensure you include your name and address and the SAQ number. This is SAQ No 396. Entries must be received by 10am on Tuesday June 26 2007.

When you have completed your self-assessment, cut out this page and add it to your professional portfolio. You can record the amount of time it has taken you. Space has been provided for comments and additional reading. You might like to consider writing a practice profile, see page 59.

- b) Correct referencing
- c) Cross-referencing
- d) Paraphrasing and citing the original author

9. Overall presentation of the assignment is important because it:

- a) Shows that students can follow instructions
- b) Sets the scene for readers
- c) Indicates that students are not committed to their professional development
- d) Indicates that students do not care about their work

10. Proof reading can be improved by:

- a) Reading work aloud
- b) Checking for spelling errors
- c) Asking a family member to read your work
- d) All of the above

This self-assessment questionnaire was compiled by Lisa Berry

1. Which of the following is true?

- a) Referencing is simply a list at the end of an assignment
- b) Students generate ideas at the organisation stage
- c) Grammar is not important
- d) Planning is the final stage of a piece of work

2. The first stage of the PROCESS framework is:

- a) Planning
- b) Referencing
- c) Organisation
- d) Engineering

3. A common referencing system is:

- a) Harvard
- b) Yale
- c) Middlesex
- d) Oxford

4. An annotated bibliography should include what information?

- a) Title and full reference of article
- b) Design of the article
- c) Overall findings of the article
- d) All of the above

5. The academic level indicated for a master's degree includes:

- a) Knowledge of background concepts
- b) An understanding of methods of enquiry
- c) Critical analysis of practice
- d) Substantial awareness of current evidence-based practice

6. The PICO model includes the components of:

- a) Perspective
- b) Patient/problem
- c) Co-ordination
- d) Evaluation

7. A fragmented assignment may be indicated by:

- a) Overuse of quotations
- b) Organisation according to the original plan
- c) Pertinent lists
- d) Relevant bullet points

8. Plagiarism includes:

- a) Cutting and pasting whole texts

Report back

This activity has taken me ____ hours to complete.

Other comments:

Now that I have read this article and completed this assessment, I think my knowledge is:

- Excellent
- Good
- Satisfactory
- Unsatisfactory
- Poor

As a result of this I intend to:

Answers

Answers to SAQ no. 394

1. d 2. a 3. b 4. a 5. b
6. a 7. d 8. c 9. c 10. d