

ALMS LEARNER SUPPORT ALMS

WRITING GUIDE

A. HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

This guide is intended to help you improve your skills in writing. It tells you a little about different writing styles and offers some basic guidelines. It suggests how you can manage the writing process, gives you some hints for avoiding pitfalls, and points you to where you can find further information. The main aim is to help you to help yourself.

Improve your writing by doing more reading, and reading more actively. Note how expert writers use variety in their expression, and always look at the context. Analyse different texts and you may be able to detect differences in style, structure and vocabulary. Identify the skills you want to improve, and the areas in which you feel less comfortable. Use a good English-English dictionary.

B. DIFFERENT WRITING STYLES

Writing styles differ depending on our purpose and intended audience. Cultural differences in language use often emerge in the written medium. On the academic level, Finnish and English texts differ in overall organisation, as well as in linguistic details such as the avoidance of repetition in English, and the use of inference.

One way of classifying writing is as follows.

- ❖ Practical writing includes personal and business letters, memos and e-mails, your curriculum vitae, and filling in forms, Look for models to help you with business letters, c.v.s and forms: accuracy may make all the difference!
- ❖ Academic writing includes thesis and conference abstracts, essays, term papers, summaries and research reports, conference presentations and publications, and theses. When you are writing more extensively in English, you should think beyond the sentence level and consider the flow and cohesion of your text.
- ❖ Creative writing includes diaries, journals, poetry prose and drama. You have more freedom to play with the language if you write creatively, but you still need to get your message across to your intended audience!

Practical writing

Forms of address

- ❖ Degrees and qualifications are placed after the name: Peter Bond M.A., Dip. Tech.
- ❖ Medical doctors and doctors of philosophy may be referred to as *Dr. XX*, otherwise academic titles are not normally used.
- ❖ The job someone is doing is written after his or her name: *Ellen Makin, lecturer in English.*

- ❖ Begin formal letters with *Dear Professor Jones, Dear Ms Makin* (no first names). Use the name if you know it.
- ❖ Use a less formal style for e-mails and letters to friends – but some kind of greeting is needed: *Frank! Hi there, Dolores!* If you don't know the recipient of your message, you still need a greeting, even in e-mails: *Dear Joan, / Mrs Nordlund,*.

Beginnings

- ❖ If you are replying to a letter, begin by referring to it: *Thank you for your letter of May 15.*
- ❖ If you are initiating the correspondence, start by introducing yourself (if you don't know the recipient) or saying why you are writing: *I am a student of Psychology at the University of Helsinki and am planning to write my Master's thesis on stress in the workplace. / I am writing to you to ask if your company would be interested in supporting our research on stress in the workplace.*

Endings

- ❖ Letters and messages usually end with some sort of *complimentary close*: *Yours sincerely*, (formal if you know the person's name); *Yours faithfully*, (formal if you don't know the name); *Best wishes, / With best regards*, (less formal); *Cheers!* (informal).
- ❖ If you are writing to ask for something, end the request on a positive (but polite) note: *I am looking forward to hearing from you. / I hope you will consider my application favourably. / I hope to hear from you soon.*

Style

- ❖ The more formal the style, the more distance you need to take from your message.
Formal: *I was wondering if you would be prepared to help us with our research.*
Semi-formal: *We are doing some research and hope that you will help us.*
Informal: *About that research project – will you help us?*
- ❖ Note the use of *would, could and should*, even in informal language: *would like to* is usually better than *want to*. *I would like to thank Professor Williams for her support.*
- ❖ When you write e-mail messages, think of the reader. Reading long sentences on screen is not easy, so keep them short and simple (KISS). In many cases, you could write your e-mail message almost as if you were talking to the person.
- ❖ Letters of complaint and replies to complaints should (usually) be polite. Try to avoid using negative expressions, and blaming the recipient or others. *There is obviously a misunderstanding* sounds a lot better than *You have not understood the problem.*

CVs

A c.v. (curriculum vitae) is a factual account about you: your background, education and work experience. There are many formats to choose from, and conventions differ. If you are applying for a job in the business world, make your c.v. short and to the point (maximum two sides of A4). Expectations may be different in the academic world. It should be mistake-free, and easy for the recipient to read. You could include information under the following headings.

Personal details

Your name and contact information.

Some employers ask for your date of birth, marital status, and other private information.

Education and qualifications

Your schooling (give English equivalents e.g., upper-secondary / senior high school for lukio): use official English names if they exist.

University and other studies after leaving school (e.g. at commercial college).

Include periods of study abroad.

Don't forget to include your qualifications (e.g., matriculation examination / high-school diploma).

Mention your knowledge of languages (*native language Finnish, fluent in Swedish and English, basic knowledge of Russian and German*).

Work history

Give the names of your employers, the dates of your employment and your job titles. Find English equivalents! You could add something about your duties, if it is relevant to the job.

List your holiday jobs, especially if you have not had much work experience yet.

Focus on aspects of the jobs that are relevant to your current application.

Other information

Spare-time interests.

Membership of clubs and societies, and positions of responsibility.

Voluntary work.

Enclose a short covering letter with your c.v.

Academic writing

Abstracts

Even if you do not write any academic papers in English, you may well be called upon to produce an English abstract of your work (also sometimes called the summary). The abstract must be easily readable, and give the maximum amount of information in the minimum number of words. It usually includes some background information, the study objectives or hypotheses, design and methods, results, conclusions and implications. You may have to write a conference abstract before your results are clear, and would then merely introduce your work and describe what you did.

The abstract must stand alone (it may be the only thing that is read), and should include key information. Avoid vague endings ("The results are discussed."), and straight repetition in the Introduction of the text proper. Always obey the instructions on length, and count all words.

It is common to use the present tense for the objectives, to move to the past until the conclusions (which may be either), and back to the present for the implications.

Sample abstract from the 2000 European Science Editors' Conference

Background. *Previous research has shown that structured abstracts (i.e. those that contain sub-headings such as this one) are of a higher quality, contain more information, and are easier to search than are abstracts produced in the traditional manner.*

Aim. *The aim of this article is to indicate how structures abstracts might be appropriate for the journal "Applied Ergonomics".*

Method. *Three traditional abstracts taken from a recent issue of "Applied Ergonomics" were re-written in a structured form. This entailed re-sequencing the information presented in the originals, and including additional information - particularly that of a quantitative kind - to meet the requirements of the sub-headings. Measures of word length, information content, readability and reader preferences were then made.*

Results. *The results showed that there were differences between the three pairs of abstracts on these various measures but that, overall, in line with the previous research, the structured abstracts were longer, more informative and judged to be clearer by their readers.*

Conclusions. *The findings support the author's view that structured abstracts are more effective than traditional ones and that they are appropriate for "Applied Ergonomics".*

183 words

C. THE WRITING PROCESS

Before you start writing, think about your purpose. If you want to send an informal letter to a friend, you could write more or less as you would speak (although you should always take a little more care since language written down is visible and somehow permanent). If you are putting together your c.v., or a conference abstract, you need to be very economical with your words: "an unnecessary word does no work at all". Longer academic texts need to be readable, descriptive and grammatically accurate, and you will probably need to revise and rewrite them. Finally, if you want your imagination to run wild, try some creative writing: the linguistic boundaries are more flexible and you can really claim ownership of the text.

General tips

- ❖ Write in English rather than translating from your mother tongue.
- ❖ Before you start, think about your purpose.
- ❖ Think about your audience.
- ❖ Give yourself time for drafting, writing, revising and rewriting.
- ❖ Above all else, aim for clarity. The informed reader should not have to read any sentence or paragraph twice.

Getting started

- ❖ Put all your ideas down on paper first, in any order. Use short, simple sentences and try not to be self-critical at this stage.
- ❖ Start the revision process by looking beyond the sentence level. Do your ideas flow in a logical order? Is your message clear at the first reading? Are the sentences properly linked? Do you repeat yourself unnecessarily?
- ❖ You could then move to the sentence level. As a rule, good sentences begin with some background (when, where, who, what), or with 'old' information, and end with the newest or most significant information (end-focus). Related words and phrases belong as close together as possible. While short sentences can be effective, too many of them inhibit fluency. Sentences that are too long and complex are very difficult to follow.
- ❖ Within the sentence, use strong and specific verbs (*discover, imply, suggest*), and minimise the repetition. Linking words (*however, thus, although*) are like signposts guiding the reader.
- ❖ Check for ambiguity (two or more possible meanings) – put yourself in the shoes of the reader.
- ❖ Use the final revision stage to check on grammatical accuracy and spelling.

Achieving an effect

- ❖ Beginning a sentence with a negative is powerful, as is ending it with an adjective: *This is not to say that he's dishonest.*
- ❖ Vary your sentence length. Short, powerful sentences are memorable.
- ❖ Make every word count: an unnecessary word does no work at all.

End focus

Texts that flow smoothly are easier to read and more memorable. The way in which parts of the text are linked affects the flow. The more you can help your reader to move from one of your ideas to the next, the more fluent your text will read. One such signposting technique is *end focus*: each clause sentence will give the basic background information early (*Who? Where? When? How? Why?*), and end with the *What?*, which leads the reader into the next idea. In the following example, consider the link between the final word of the first sentence and the first idea of the second.

- ❖ Such behaviour is nowadays **unacceptable**. The **police** would **arrest** anyone who did this.
- ❖ Such behaviour is unacceptable **nowadays**. **In 1700**, however, cats suffered treatment we consider cruel.
- ❖ Nowadays no one accepts such **behaviour**. **Tormenting** animals is, in adults at least, a symptom of a psychiatric problem.
- ❖ Unacceptable behaviour nowadays includes mistreatment of **animals**. **Foxhunting**, for example, has recently been outlawed by the British Parliament.

Final checklist

- ❖ Does your title show the topic and the purpose?
- ❖ Does your introduction tell the reader that you have something worthwhile to say?
- ❖ If you are describing methods, are they clear?
- ❖ Do you refer in your discussion to the results of your study in terms of the stated aims?
- ❖ Are your references complete and consistent?
- ❖ Have you checked your spelling (especially of names and special terms)?
- ❖ Have you checked the grammatical structures?
- ❖ Have you checked the overall organization of your text (in terms of chapters and sections)? (O'Connor, 1991)

Peer critiquing

Peer critiquing means taking a critical look at the work your fellow students or colleagues have done, and in turn they take a look at your work. You can also be your own critic. The idea is to produce better texts by focusing on the generation, clarification and development of ideas, and the clarity of the message. It also includes linguistic elements such as grammar and punctuation, but not in the early stages.

Use the following questions to guide you.

- What do you *like best* about the piece?
- How do you feel about the *content*?
- How could it be made *more interesting/entertaining*?
- Does the author give it a *personal touch*? If so, how?
- Who is talking*? What is the author's position or background?
- Who* was the piece written for?
- What *style* of language is used, and is it *consistent*?
- Look for examples of *figurative* and *idiomatic* language.
- How easy is it to follow the *train of thought*? Is there anything that does not relate directly to the storyline?
- How are the ideas *linked* together? How *smoothly* are they developed?
- Does the author say *what is going to happen*?

How clear is the *ending*? Were you waiting for something else?
 Are all the *ideas* clear? If not, why not?
 Are all the *sentences* clear? If not, why not?
 How *appropriate* and *varied* is the vocabulary?

TROUBLESHOOTING

Confusions

<i>access / excess</i>	You <i>access</i> data in your computer (you are able to use it); you may have <i>excess</i> data if there is too much of it.
<i>amount / number</i>	<i>Number</i> (and <i>fewer</i>) goes with countable nouns (bridges), and <i>amount</i> with uncountable nouns (<i>sugar</i>).
<i>economic / economical</i>	<i>Economic</i> is to do with the economy: people who used money sparingly, and cars that consume less petrol, are said to be <i>economical</i> .
<i>effect / affect</i>	<i>Effect</i> is usually a noun (This has an effect on the results), and <i>affect</i> is usually a verb (This affects the results).
<i>imply / implicate</i>	<i>Imply</i> (verb) and <i>implication</i> (noun) are common and safe,; <i>implicate</i> (verb) suggests blame or guilt.
<i>interested / interesting</i> <i>interesting.</i>	You are <i>interested in</i> a subject because it is
<i>it's / its</i>	<i>It's</i> , meaning <i>it is</i> , is a contracted form: the genitive <i>its</i> (<i>This machine has a mind of its own</i>) has no apostrophe.
<i>own</i>	This is always preceded by a genitive (his/her/our/Jane's own dictionary).
<i>while / since / as</i>	Each can refer to <i>time</i> . Because of the danger of ambiguity, use <i>and</i> , <i>but</i> or <i>whereas</i> instead of <i>while</i> , and <i>because</i> or <i>although</i> instead of <i>since</i> when the reference is not to time.
<i>who's / whose</i>	Again, <i>who's</i> is a contracted form of <i>who is</i> : <i>who's going to buy the milk?</i> <i>Whose</i> is the genitive: <i>whose turn is it?</i>
<i>The decimal separator</i>	This is denoted by a point (.) in English: <i>1.3 million, 0.2 per cent</i>).
<i>The thousands separator</i>	This is denoted by a comma (,), or by a space: <i>4,100: 23 398 000</i> .
<i>The percentage sign</i>	There is no space between the figure and the percentage sign: <i>23.8%</i>
<i>Currencies</i>	use the recognized abbreviations, placed before the figures: <i>GBP 1.9 million, EUR 65 000</i> .

A few tips

- ❖ *Also* very rarely begins a sentence in English, and belongs as close as possible to the verb it is associated with (*It was **also** shown that students of social science were more politically aware*).
- ❖ Try not to overuse words and expressions like *for example*, *however*, *even*, *just*, *important*, *central*, *in addition to*. Check where they should appear in the sentence!
- ❖ Avoid unnecessary words, as in *pre-set* (*in advance*) and *alongside* (*with*).
- ❖ Before you write *e.g.*, consider whether it serves any purpose: it is greatly overused.

- ❖ According to some experts, *etc.* has no place in academic writing: if what it implies is so important, it is worth mentioning specifically.
- ❖ *Hyphens* link words that belong together, often when several adjectival expressions are used: *He lived in a one-roomed first-floor flat.* The absence of a hyphen may cause confusion: *six year-old boys* and *six-year-old boys* mean different things.
- ❖ Make sure the subject of your sentence goes with the verb. *Going home on the bus it started to rain* is not cohesive: *it* is the subject of the verb, but not the subject of *going home*. *When I was going home on the bus it started to rain.*
- ❖ Check the prepositions you use with phrasal verbs (and whether you need a preposition at all): *resemble something*, *discuss something*, *inform somebody about something*, *concentrate on something*, *apologise to someone for (not doing) something*, *to translate from Finnish into English*.

D. REFERENCES AND USEFUL WEB ADDRESSES

Collins Cobuild publications:

Student's Dictionary plus grammar (3rd edition): due to be published in January 2005

English Usage, 2nd edition (2004).

Advanced Learner's English Dictionary, 4th edition (2003)

Dictionary of Phrasal Verbs (2002)

King, Graham 2004; *Good Writing Skills* Collins, UK

Collins letter Writing 2004: Collins, UK

Norris, Carol 2004: *Academic Writing in English* Helsinki University Language Services

O'Connor, M 1991: *Writing Successfully in Science* Chapman & Hall
Perttunen, J.M. 2000: *The Words Between* Duodecim, Helsinki

Silk, Riitta, J.Mäki & F Kjisik 2003: *Grammar Rules!* Finland, Otava

Truss, Lynne 2003: *Eats Shoots and Leaves: the zero-tolerance approach to punctuation*, Profile Books, UK

<http://writing.colostate.edu/index.cfm> (Writing Center at Colorado State University)

<http://owl.english.purdue.edu> (Purdue's online writing lab.)

<http://purdue.placementmanual.com/resume> (c.v.s)

<http://jobsearchabout.com/od/curriculumvitae>

<http://www.angelfire.com/wi/writingprocess/index.html> (writing process)

<http://www.jobcentreplus.gov.uk> (customers home: applying for a job)

<http://lc.ust.hk/~sac/sacadsheet.html> (The Hong Kong University of Science and Technology Language Centre)

And don't forget the ALMS home page! <http://www.helsinki.fi.kksc/alms>

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