Writing in an Academic Style:
Sentences and Paragraphs

This workshop will:

− Provide guiding principles when writing for assessment at the sentence level
− Explain the structure of paragraphs for academic writing
− Offer practical follow-on resources for enhancing your academic style when writing

Teaching Points:

1. Guidelines to sentence content and length
2. Adding impact to your sentences
3. Structure of paragraphs
4. Resources for enhancing your academic writing style
1. Guidelines to sentence content and length

Students often make the mistake of writing long and winding sentences running over many lines hoping that the marker or tutor will not only be able to follow the ‘Yellow Brick Road’ of words and find the amazing points they want to make which will earn them loads of marks but also impress the reader enough to think they are marvellous so they will think favourably about the rest of the assessed assignment or they may hope the marker or tutor won’t notice that they are not actually sure about the questions so do not know what the answer is. Phew! How about this:

*Students often make the mistake of writing long and winding sentences over many lines. There are a number of reasons for this: first, they have made multiple points made in the sentence and hope the reader will find them all. Alternatively, they think it will impress the marker which can be ‘banked’ for the rest of the assignment. Finally, they are trying to hide their lack of understanding of a question. Better?*

Notice in the second paragraph:

- no sentence is longer than 1 ½ lines
- there is one point for each sentence
- words are not repeated unnecessarily
- punctuation is used appropriately

These are the basic guidelines when writing in an academic style although they are also useful for other formats of writing.

**TALKING POINT**

Read the following sentence and we will look at how to improve it using punctuation.

It is possible to argue that almost all advertisements, with the exception of a few, are informative, indeed, as we have already seen, some appear to be wholly concerned with this, although government bodies releasing warnings about smoking or the use of domestic fire alarms are clearly intent on changing our behaviour they are still concerned to give the public what they believe is vital information.

Adapted from Greetham (2013: 228)
Activity 1: Improving sentences

Read the following paragraph, and highlight where punctuation or word addition or removal can improve clarity. Check with your neighbours to see if your results tally.

But here lies the problem we seem to talk about three different things when we describe something as a ‘need’. First, there is the strongest case: the need for certain things, like food and water, to maintain the minimum biological levels necessary for survival. There are those things we need in order to maintain a good quality of life like adequate education, housing and a clean environment to which we believe we are entitled and there are those things we might describe as ‘social needs’ created by living in a particular society or part of the world where these things are normal. Some are created by advertising others by governments and organisations that influence our expectations. Advertisers lead us to believe that we all need annual holidays, fast cars, the latest fashions, even smart phones and table computers while governments promote our need for national identity and a sense of community.

Adapted from Greetham (2013: 230)

2. Adding impact to your sentences

The end of a sentence has the most impact as the meaning of the sentence becomes clear at this point; to add to this impact, make it as simply as possible.

Look at these two phrases: they say the same thing but one has more impact.

‘You’ve never had it so good.’  ‘You’ve never enjoyed such personal affluence.’

Once you’ve made your point, DON’T WRITE ANYMORE about the same point. You may think you can make the meaning clearer or could add something extra, but usually it will not have this effect. It looks like you are edging your bets or trying to impress, when all you’ve done is make a sentence longer and dug into your word count.

Taking the above phrase, how would it look if another clause were added?

‘You’ve never had it so good, thanks to my government.’

Doesn’t quite have the same ‘umph’, does it? However, you could move the final clause to the front so the point of the sentence is again at the end:

‘Thanks to my government, you’ve never had it so good.’

Not as striking as without it, but much better.
When you are editing your essay, if you find this arrangement of extra clauses at the end of a sentence, you can….

- Break off and start a new sentence
- See if the closing clause can be relocated as the opening phrase or at some other point in the sentence
- Just cut it out

### 3. Structure of paragraphs

Paragraphs group similar ideas and material together, all organised around a central idea or theme, which is usually made clear in the first sentence (your introductory ‘topic’ sentence). Later sentences develop the theme of the ‘topic sentence’, provide evidence for the points made (using sources found during research), and follow each other in a logical order with one leading on to the next. The last sentence sums up the paragraph and/or leads onto the next paragraph.

To summarise:

1. Introductory sentence – makes the topic of the paragraph clear
2. Middle sentences – develop the theme, provide evidence, and follow each other logically
3. Last sentence – summarises and/or leads into next paragraph

**TALKING POINT**

Below is a paragraph on Mary Seacole, a self-trained nurse and hotel owner who nursed soldiers in the Crimean War. The sentences are in random order: what order should they be in? Rewrite the paragraph in the space below.

Undaunted, Mary made her own way to the war zone. Once in the Crimea, she not only nursed the soldiers, but also ran a hotel and sold food, wine and medicines. Although she had worked for the army before, at its own request, this time she was turned down. On the outbreak of the Crimean War, Mary volunteered her services to the British Army.
Activity 2: Sentence order in paragraphs
Read the paragraph below on study skills and place the sentences in the correct order (no need to rewrite them: just highlight or label them with the right number). Check with your neighbours to see if your answers tally.

The post-1992 universities in particular, with their larger share of students from non-traditional backgrounds, have introduced a range of strategies to support student learning (Paczuska, 2002; Thomas, 2002). Student numbers and the diversity of the student population have increased considerably in the UK in recent years. As will be discussed in more detail below, the bolt-on approach has severe limitations, mainly because it separates study skills from the process and content of learning. A common approach to providing learning support is by extracurricular ‘study skills’ courses, often offered in dedicated learning support centres (Gamache, 2002; Haggis & Pouget, 2002). This approach is referred to as ‘bolt-on’ (Bennett et al., 2000), as opposed to the ‘built-in’ or embedded approach where learning is developed through the subject teaching. This diversity poses a great challenge to universities to ensure the progression of students from different educational backgrounds and abilities.

Extract from Wingate (2006)

4. Resources for enhancing your academic writing style

The three websites below provide information and ideas to improve your academic writing style, as do the books in the reference list.

http://www.phrasebank.manchester.ac.uk/ provides examples of phrases useful in academic writing, for example, how to convert ‘I’ phrases into the 3rd person.

http://www.chompchomp.com/ not only gives lots of ‘how to’ information but will raise a smile at the same time

www.brad.ac.uk/academic-skills has lots of resources related to academic writing.

If you would like help with academic writing at the word level, we run a workshop on this subject. Please look on our website for more information.
References


Answers

**Sentence content and length guidelines.**

It is possible to argue that almost all advertisements are informative. Indeed, as we have already seen, some appear to be wholly concerned with this. Although government bodies, releasing warnings about smoking or the use of domestic fire alarms, are clearly intent on changing our behaviour, they are still concerned to give the public what they believe is vital information.

**Activity 1: Improving sentences**

But here lies the problem: we seem to talk about three different things when we describe something as a ‘need’. First, there is the strongest case: the need for certain things, like food and water, to maintain the minimum biological levels necessary for survival. Second, there are those things we need in order to maintain a good quality of life, like adequate education, housing and a clean environment, to which we believe we are entitled. Finally, there are those things we might describe as ‘social needs’ created by living in a particular society or part of the world where these things are normal. Some are created by advertising, others by governments and organisations that influence our expectations. Advertisers lead us to believe that we all need annual holidays, fast cars, the latest fashions, even smart phones and table computers, while governments promote our need for national identity and a sense of community.
On the outbreak of the Crimean War, Mary volunteered her services to the British Army. Although she had worked for the army before, at its own request, this time she was turned down. Undaunted, Mary made her own way to the war zone. Once in the Crimea, she not only nursed the soldiers, but also ran a hotel and sold food, wine and medicines.

**Activity 2:** Study skills

Student numbers and the diversity of the student population have increased considerably in the UK in recent years. This diversity poses a great challenge to universities to ensure the progression of students from different educational backgrounds and abilities. The post-1992 universities in particular, with their larger share of students from non-traditional backgrounds, have introduced a range of strategies to support student learning (Paczuska, 2002; Thomas, 2002). A common approach to providing learning support is by extra-curricular ‘study skills’ courses, often offered in dedicated learning support centres (Gamache, 2002; Haggis & Pouget, 2002). This approach is referred to as ‘bolt-on’ (Bennett et al., 2000), as opposed to the ‘built-in’ or embedded approach where learning is developed through the subject teaching. As will be discussed in more detail below, the bolt-on approach has severe limitations, mainly because it separates study skills from the process and content of learning.