

Writing up your University Assignments and Research Projects

A practical handbook

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Foreword

Who is the book for?

Whether you are an undergraduate or postgraduate student, a native speaker or a non-native speaker, fresh out of high school or a mature student returning after years away from academic life, the prospect of writing college or university assignments and/or writing up a research project can be a daunting one which, understandably, often causes anxiety and prompts many questions. Faced with writing projects that can range from 2000 to 100,000 words, many students quickly find themselves struggling to cope and in need of clear, straightforward guidance. Quite naturally, they often turn first to their lecturers, tutors or supervisors, only to find that much as they might wish to help, their own ever-increasing workload – and sometimes lack of linguistic expertise – often prevents them from being able to offer the level of support necessary and, as a result, students can be left fending for themselves and feeling uncertain, isolated and helpless. In the worst cases, this can lead to intense frustration, panic and, ultimately, even despair and failure. Where students who face difficulties do manage to submit work, lecturers and supervisors can be left struggling to understand it. In-house English language and study skills support classes are often over-subscribed and tend to focus primarily (and often inadequately) on non-native speakers, while private institutions tend to offer only general writing courses and can be costly.

This guide is our attempt to address this problem by providing a carefully structured and comprehensive programme of self-study that is accessible to both native and non-native speakers of English and which responds to the needs of undergraduate as well as postgraduate students. It is designed to develop not only your understanding of the mechanics of writing, but also your ability to be critical about your own writing through systematically raising your awareness of the many different facets of the writing process, from grammatical structure, punctuation and vocabulary, to an understanding and appreciation of the broader principles of good writing – coherence and good argument structure, an awareness of style and register, and formatting conventions, to name just a few. Most importantly, it strives to help you develop a sense of autonomy, control and self-confidence.

How is the book organized?

The book is divided into 3 main parts as follows:

Part 1 presents the fundamentals of good academic writing, including a detailed description of the various functions writing performs and the words and phrases associated with them, as well as an explanation of the building blocks of academic writing and guidance on how to structure your writing correctly and effectively. In addition, it focuses on more advanced issues relating to writing style, referencing and layout.

Part 2 presents an initial introduction to the research process and the writing-up of research, followed by an analysis and explanation of the various parts or stages of a research report, from the title page to the bibliography and appendices. In addition, it offers a chapter on getting your work published, along with suggestions for doing so.

Part 3 contains a 'Toolkit' consisting of a simple guide to punctuation use, a glossary of key terms, Coxhead's Academic Word List, a list of prefixes and suffixes with their meanings, and an Appendix with style guide resources/links for referencing, as well as sample materials.

Other key features of the book include:

- accessible explanations;
- strategies and tips for more efficient and effective writing;
- multiple examples, many of which are authentic;
- tasks designed to test your understanding of what you have read and provide you with opportunities to practise what you have learnt.

How to use the book

We have tried to structure the book incrementally such that each part builds upon what has gone before. Nevertheless, each part essentially works also as a stand-alone section or 'unit' and as such you can 'dip into' the book at any point in order to gain clarification on a particular aspect of writing. We should emphasize, though, that however you choose to use the book, it is important that you read all the *Writing Tips* and *Notes* (indicated by the pen and notepad icons respectively) and attempt as many of the *Tasks* as possible. Both are a crucial part of the learning process adopted in the book. The *Writing Tips* contain important information, and the tasks give you an opportunity to test your understanding. Suggested answers to the tasks can be found at the end of each of the sections in which tasks have been set. In the book's Appendix, we have included Coxhead's *Academic Word List*, a list of those words most

frequently used in academic discourse, along with an explanation of how it may assist you in your writing.

A final word

Finally, a word of caution: although there are rules and conventions that guide us in our writing, these are rarely as absolute as textbooks would have us believe; consequently, you will quite frequently come across instances where they appear to be flouted. Who can flout the rules and when is a complex issue beyond the remit of this guide. Suffice it to say that it is only via exposure through reading and by a process of trial and error that you will acquire an understanding of the many exceptions to rules and the often very subtle circumstances in which they occur.

You should also remember that there can be some variation between academic disciplines in the conventions and expectations that apply to the writing of assignments, dissertations and theses, and it is therefore important to consult carefully with your colleagues, tutors, supervisors and university information services in order to ensure that you are fully aware of the conventions that apply specifically to your own field of study.

We hope very much that you find this guide helpful and wish you luck with your writing projects.

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A guide to the book's icons: what do they mean?

We have suggested in the Foreword that you read all of the Writing Tips and Notes that appear throughout the book; these can be identified via the icons that accompany them. We would like to take a moment to clarify exactly what these icons mean and what kind of information they signal.



Writing Tips

Where you see this icon, you will find a short piece of advice about how you can improve your writing. Often the information emphasizes or highlights a particular point, or provides 'additional' information not always featured in more general discussions of academic writing. It includes strategies for writing more effectively and efficiently, and alerts to help you avoid common pitfalls. These 'Writing Tips', then, focus specifically on the actual mechanics of writing and are therefore instructional or procedural in nature; they tell you *how* to do things, and our purpose in including them is to pass on to you 'tips' that we – and others – have picked up over years of writing in an academic context and of marking students' work.



Notes

Unlike the Writing Tips, Notes do not focus specifically on the mechanics of writing and are not instructional or procedural in nature. Instead, where you see these icons, you will find observations about, or brief insights into, different aspects of the processes of writing up assignments and research projects, notes of caution, reminders, and ideas to help you think about and assess your writing.



Task Keys

These icons signal answer keys to the tasks set in the book. You will find these icons appearing within a shaded box at the end of sections in which tasks have been set. Note that solutions to tasks will not be given in cases where you are required to do your own research (for example, analysing a piece of writing of your own choice with a view to identifying a particular feature).