

Guidelines for academic writing

Revised list from Hartley, J. (1997). Writing the thesis. In N. Graves & V. Varma (Eds.), *Working for a doctorate* (pp. 97–100). London: Routledge.

- 1 *Keep in mind your readers – they may not be experts*
Imagine that you are writing for a fellow colleague – or for one of your students – who is familiar with the conventions of your discipline, but who does not know your area. Readers need to be able to grasp what you did and what you found, and to follow your arguments easily.
- 2 *Use the first rather than the third person*
Compare: ‘We suggest that . . .’ *with* ‘This paper suggests that . . .’
- 3 *Use short, simple words*
It is easier to understand short, familiar words than technical terms that mean the same thing. *Compare*: ‘We assume, from the start . . .’ *with* ‘We assume, a priori . . .’
- 4 *Use active tenses*
It is easier to understand text when writers use active tenses rather than passive ones. *Compare*: ‘We found that the chemists varied more than the engineers on a measure of extraversion . . .’ *with* ‘Greater variation was found on a measure of extraversion with the chemists than with the engineers . . .’
- 5 *Sequencing in sentences*
It is more helpful for the reader in English if the subject of the verb comes *before*, and the object *after*, the verb. *Compare*: ‘Students need accessible information to become intelligent customers . . .’ *with* ‘To become intelligent customers, students need accessible information . . .’
- 6 *Place sequences in order*
Similarly, it is best to describe procedures in the order that they take place. For example, *compare*: ‘Before the experiment commenced, we first briefed the participants on the necessary procedures and any precautions

that they should take . . .’ *with* ‘We briefed the participants on the necessary procedures and any precautions that they should take before the experiment began . . .’

7 *Avoid negatives*

Negatives, especially double or treble ones, can be confusing. *Compare*: ‘The figures provide no indication that the costs would not have been lower if competition had not been restricted . . .’ *with* ‘The figures provide no indication that competition would have produced higher costs . . .’. Negative qualifications can be used, however, for particular emphasis, and for correcting misconceptions.

8 *Avoid abbreviations*

Many writers use abbreviations for technical terms: for example RAE for research assessment exercise. Too many abbreviations on a page are off-putting. Furthermore, if the abbreviations are unfamiliar to the reader, it is easy for them to forget what they stand for.

9 *Avoid overloading the text with references*

It is difficult to read sentences that end with long lists of supporting references. It is better to cite only the more recent papers that between them summarise earlier research. *Compare*: ‘Common practice has been to assume the condition of local equilibrium (for example, see Bickle and others, 1997, and Brady, 2001, for surveys of this research) . . .’ *with* ‘Common practice has been to assume the condition of local equilibrium (Baumgartner and Rumble, 1988; Bickle and Baker, 1990; Bickle and others, 1995, 1997; Brady, 2001, Cartwright and Valley, 1991; Ferry, 1986, 1994) . . .’

10 *Vary sentence lengths*

It is easier to understand short sentences than it is to understand long ones, because long sentences overload the memory system. Short sentences do not. However, it is good practice to vary sentence lengths, as long strings of short sentences feel ‘choppy’.

As a rule of thumb, I suggest that sentences less than twenty words long are probably fine. Sentences twenty to thirty words long are probably satisfactory. Sentences thirty to forty words long are suspect. Sentences with over forty words in them will probably benefit from re-writing.

11 *Use short paragraphs*

Short paragraphs are easier to read than long ones. Any typescript that has a page of text without at least one new paragraph needs attention!

12 *Use numbers or bullets*

Numbers or ‘bullets’ are useful if you want to make a series of points within a paragraph. *Compare*: ‘Four devices to help the reader of a thesis are a detailed contents page, skeleton outlines for each chapter, headings in the text, and a concluding summary . . .’ *with*:

‘Four devices to help the reader of a thesis are:

- a detailed contents page
- skeleton outlines for each chapter
- headings in the text
- a concluding summary.’

13 *Settings for lists*

It helps the reader if you use space to list the points in a structurally similar way, for example:

Bullet points for items without any particular order	Numbers for steps in a sequence	Letters for mutually exclusive items
• ———	1 ———	(a) ———
• ———	2 ———	(b) ———
• ———	3 ———	(c) ———

It is best to use *bullets* when each point is of equal value, *numbers* when there is an order, or sequence in the points made, and *letters* for mutually exclusive items.

14 *Use subheadings*

Subheadings label sections so that writers and readers know where they are, and where they are going. Subheadings help the reader to scan, select and retrieve material, as well as to recall it. Subheadings can be written in the form of statements or in the form of questions. If the subheadings are in the form of questions, then the text below must answer them. This helps the author to present – and the reader to follow – the argument.

15 *Print out and revise/edit draft copies*

Print out draft copies when the text is nearing completion. Copies allow you to check more easily the tiny details – punctuation, references, etc. – as well as to get a better feel for the document as a whole. Think about *global* revisions – re-sequencing major portions – and *local* revisions – making changes to individual words and sentences (see Appendix 2).

16 *When in difficulty . . .*

If it is difficult to explain something, think of how you would explain it to a particular person. Think of what you would say, try saying it and then write this down. Then polish it.

17 *Read the text out aloud*

Reading the text out aloud (or silently) to oneself is a useful way of seeing how well the text flows. You may find that you need to insert commas to make text groupings clearer, you may get out of breath because sentences are too long, and you might inadvertently read out a simpler version of the written text. If you do this, change the text to this simpler version.

18 *Ask other people to read your drafts*

Colleagues and students may be willing to read and comment on drafts. Ask them to point out those sentences or sections that they think other readers might find it difficult to follow. People are more willing to point out difficulties for others than they are to admit to their own.

You might like to do this separately for your tables, graphs and abstracts. Ask your readers to tell you what each of these features says to them.

19 *Read and listen to other authors*

Absorb techniques from other writers you admire. Writers of weekly/monthly columns in magazines, or of weekly talks on radio, often produce pure gems.

20 *Revise continuously . . .*

Never regard the last version of the text as the final one. Put this version on one side and then come back to it a day or two later. Seeing the text with fresh eyes somehow suggests further changes, but draw the line eventually!