

# **RULES AND CONVENTIONS OF ACADEMIC WRITING**

The details in this hand-out are based on material first developed by Hazel Hall at Queen Margaret University College in November 1998.

This hand-out probably merits consideration for the world's top ten of boring documents. However, if you want to do well in your assignments you need to get the basics right. If you don't get these "little" things correct, then the perceived integrity of your work as a whole is at risk. Always proof read your work to remove the surface glitches so that the value of your hard work shines through.

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## **Part I: Basic grammar rules for academic writing**

### **The rules**

Rule 1: You must write in sentences

Rule 2: Subjects and verbs in sentences must agree with each other

Rule 3: You must use appropriate punctuation

Rule 4: You must use the right vocabulary

Rule 5: You must use the apostrophe correctly and with care

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### **Rule 1: You must write in sentences**

Sentences have the following characteristics: they start with a capital letter; end with a full stop, exclamation mark or question mark; and contain a verb (doing word).

Students commonly make the mistake of not writing in full sentences (they fail to provide a main clause in their "sentence") or write very long, rambling sentences that would be better chopped into smaller ones. Short, clear sentences are usually more effective than those which are long and complex. If you are in any doubt, split up any longer sentences into two or three shorter ones. This advice is especially important if you find writing difficult, or English is not your first language. Short sentences will help you avoid grammatical mistakes and make it easy for the reader to follow your line of argument. Each sentence that you write should make sense if it were read out independently of the sentence before and after it.

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### **Rule 2: Subjects and verbs in sentences must agree with one another**

If the subject of a sentence is singular, then the verb form must be singular as well:

The student passes the exam.

In this example the student is the subject. There is just one student, so the subject is singular. The verb is "to pass" and agrees with the singular subject. If this sentence described the

activity of several students the subject would be plural, so the verb agreement would reflect this:

The students pass the exam.

Problems can occur with case agreement in two circumstances:

1. A statement begins in the singular, but drifts into the plural. The following sentence is incorrect:

*An information manager needs to know whether they are doing their job properly.*

The easiest solution to this problem is to make both the subject and verb plural:

Information managers need to know whether they are doing their jobs properly.

2. Collective nouns cause confusion. The following sentence is incorrect:

The government are passing new legislation.

Since there is just one government in the example given above, the sentence should read:

The government is passing new legislation.

Once you know this rule for written work, you will notice that in spoken English it is often broken. For example, would you say "There's four of them here" or "There are four of them here"? Whilst this is acceptable in spoken English, it is not for formal written work. Make sure that you get this right in your written assignments. (Similarly students should watch out for other instances where the influence of speech may have an adverse effect on writing. Consider, for example, how someone might say "I should *of* done it", when the grammatically correct construction is "I should have done it".)

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### **Rule 3: You must use appropriate punctuation**

If you have any doubt about punctuation, use as little as possible and write short, direct sentences. It is perfectly possible to write a good piece of work using only the comma and the full stop.

#### **3.1 Commas**

Commas are used to denote a weak pause in a sentence. If you find that you write in long sentences, check whether it might be better create several short sentences replacing commas with full stops. (If you do this you must also check that the verb forms make sense.)

### **3.2 Dashes and hyphens**

Try to minimise the use of dashes in your formal work. They can give the impression of a style that is too chatty. They may be used in pairs to insert an explanatory comment or a short list:

Each member of staff - from the most junior to the Chief Executive - is invited to comment on the plans.

Dashes should not be used as a substitute for parentheses - or mixed with them.

Hyphens are used to connect prefixes to words (for example, CD-ROM drives) or when forming compounds such as "second-in-command".

### **3.3 Exclamation marks**

Use exclamation marks as little as possible in formal work. They give the work a juvenile and over-excited tone.

### **3.4 Full stops**

Full stops are not needed after titles such as Dr, Mrs or Co, nor are they required for well-known company titles such as IBM.

### **3.5 Question marks**

It is unlikely that you should use the question mark in the work you submit. After all, you are meant to be answering the question, not posing any new ones!

### **3.6 Colons**

The colon is used to introduce a strong pause within a sentence. It separates two clauses which could stand alone as separate sentences but are linked by some relationship in their meaning. There are four instances in which you might use a colon.

1. A colon can introduce a list:

The job placement entails various duties: setting up a database, liaising with customers, ordering supplies and taking minutes at meetings.

2. A colon can precede a long quotation:

The Computing Officer explains the reason for this decision: "Java can enable searching on any kind of platform. Time and money has been wasted by developing 35 different versions, each requiring different programmers. With a joint effort we knew we'd have an amazing product."

3. A colon can be used before a clause which explains (often by way of illustration) the previous statement:

The Business Information Systems degree course is highly regarded: academic standards are high, the lecturers are pleasant and the students enjoy the modules taught.

4. A colon can be used to indicate a sharp contrast:

She enjoys keeping up to date with friends on Facebook: her friend thinks it is too time-consuming.

### 3.7 Semi-colons

You should only use the semi-colon if you know how to use it properly. It is difficult to identify when to use it, since it represents a pause that is longer than a comma, but shorter than a full stop. There are four main uses:

1. A semi-colon is used when a second clause expands or explains the first:

Neither system matched the requirements exactly; this had to be checked with the supplier.

2. A semi-colon is used to describe a sequence of actions or different aspects of the same topic:

There was funding for the project; a member of staff was keen to implement the system; the work could be achieved within the time scale set.

3. A semi-colon is used before clauses which begin with "nevertheless", "therefore", "even so" and "for instance":

She left the house early; even so she missed the bus.

4. A semi-colon is used to mark off a series of phrases or clauses which contain commas:

Those involved in information work hold memberships with organisations such as: CILIP; UKeIG; ASIST; BCS: and the European chapter of SLA.

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#### Rule 4: You must use the right vocabulary

It is important that you use the right vocabulary in your work. The mistakes that crop up regularly in students' work are usually due to confusion between two words such as:

- affect/effect, quote/quotation, practise/practice, license/licence (the first is the verb, the second is the noun);
- dependent and dependant (the first is an adjective, the second is a noun);
- alternate and alternative, principal and principle (these words have different meanings);
- less and fewer (less means less in quantity: there is less water than before. Fewer means smaller in number: there are fewer people than before).

Bear in mind that a spelling checker can identify spelling errors in your work, but will not pick up misused vocabulary.

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## **Rule 5: You must use the apostrophe correctly (and with care)**

The apostrophe has two functions: it indicates the possessive case and contractions.

### **5.1 Possessive case**

The possessive case refers to ownership. You can say "the work of the information manager" or "the information manager's work." The use of the apostrophe depends on whether the possessor is singular or plural.

When the possessor is singular, possession is indicated by using an apostrophe followed by the letter s added to the noun:  
the student's assignment

When the possessors are plural, possession is indicated by placing the apostrophe after the final s of the noun:

the students' assignments

Note that some organisations omit the apostrophe in their name, for example Barclays Bank. In academic writing, however, you must use the apostrophe to denote possession.

### **5.2 Contraction**

In written English words that have been contracted (i.e. shortened) use apostrophes to show where the missing letters would normally appear. This has two main purposes: to avoid confusion with other words and to indicate a different pronunciation for example "we're" is a shortened version of "we are". The apostrophe distinguishes the word "we're" from "were", which has both a different meaning and different pronunciation.

Examples of the use of apostrophes to denote missing letters:

1. They don't employ staff in Wales. [do not]
2. I can't come on Monday. [cannot]
3. It's likely that the company will grow by 10% in the next financial year. [It is]

NB Possessive adjectives do not use apostrophes.

Adjectives are describing words. There are many of these in English, for example blue, happy, distinguished.

Possessive adjectives are words that describe possession. There are seven of these in English: my, your, his, her, its, our, their. Note that *none* of these takes an apostrophe. This includes "its". So, if the use of the word "its" appears in your work to denote ownership, remember that it does *not* take the apostrophe.

Examples of the use of possessive adjectives:

1. The information manager has been in her job for ten months. [The job belongs to her].
2. The organisation prepared its information strategy in 2013. [The information strategy belongs to it].
3. Their market sector is in decline. [The market sector belongs to them].

Check every instance of the words "its" and "it's", "there" and "their", "you're" and "your" in your finished work.

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## **Part II: Conventions in academic writing**

1. Style conventions: numbers and dates; capitals; print enhancements; abbreviations; typing and spelling
  2. Tone conventions: formal, jargon and cliché-free, impersonal writing
  3. Forming arguments: how to turn your information into a well-written essay or report
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### **1. Style conventions**

#### **1.1 Numbers and dates**

Numbers below one hundred are usually written in full:

Ten students came to the lecture.

Numbers above one hundred may be presented by digits:

There are 400 databases available.

Dates are usually given in the conventional combinations of numbered day, named month and numbered year. Punctuation is not required:

The service was set up on 11 April 2012.

References to centuries are spelt out, without capitals:

During the twentieth century many communication technologies were developed.

Decades may be referred to by name or number. The numbered form is not followed by an apostrophe:

In the 1990s the term "Internet" became a media buzz word.

#### **1.2 Capitals**

Capital letters are used for:

proper nouns: Hazel Hall, Professor, Edinburgh Napier University.  
names of civic holidays: Christmas Day  
geographical names: Central Belt  
public thoroughfares: Princes Street  
important events: Graduation Day  
trade names: Windows, Java  
journal titles: *International Journal of Information Management*  
the first letter (only) of book titles: *Navigating business information sources: a practical guide for information managers*

### 1.3 Print enhancements

Print enhancements should be used sparingly. If you over-use them in an essay your work can end up looking like a ransom note. Bear in mind that you should follow the conventions of the referencing system that you are using if you quote book or journal titles in your work. For example, APA referencing requires you to denote book and journal titles by using italics.

### 1.4 Abbreviations

Abbreviations are not used in formal English. They give the impression of a style that is chatty and too informal. So, for instance, when you want to introduce an example into your work you should use, in full, the phrase "for example".

When you are taking notes in class you may like to use the abbreviation for "for example". The abbreviation is for the Latin term "exempli gratia" and is written as "e.g."

Do not confuse "e.g." with "i.e."

"i.e." is an abbreviation for the Latin phrase "id est" and means "that is to say" or "in other words".

### 1.5 Typing and spelling

Even if you are good at spelling you can make typing errors. All work for submission should be spell checked before it is printed out. (Make sure that the spell checker you use is set to UK English.) All print-outs should then be proof read. If there are still mistakes in your work you should correct, spell check and proof read again until you are satisfied that all mistakes are eradicated. Don't be lazy about proof-reading. Your lecturers expect you to hand in your best work. If you hand in work that is below the standard of what you could achieve with more care and attention, you are doing yourself a big disservice. This may be perpetuated when lecturers are asked to comment on your progress in formal situations, for example when writing references.

There are some words that students regularly misspell. It is worth learning the spelling of these, bearing in mind the hints on how to remember the correct spelling:

- accommodation (think - plenty of room for 2 x C and 2 x M)
- apparent (think - parent)
- definite (think - infinity)
- liaison (think - 2 x i, liaising with one another)

- necessary (think - it's necessary to wear 1 collar, 2 socks)
  - occasionally (think - it would be rare to wear 2 collars, 1 sock)
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## **2. Tone conventions**

### **2.1 Write formally**

A report or essay is a formal piece of work. The tone of your work should be formal, and not chatty. For example, rather than beginning sentences with the word "Also" or "Besides", which gives the impression that what you are about to write is an after-thought, use an alternative such as "In addition". Similarly the word "However" is more appropriate to start a sentence in a formal piece of work than the word "But".

The use of brackets should be kept to a minimum. They are used to indicate a supplementary remark, an authorial aside, or a qualification of some sort. Use them too frequently and you end up with a choppy effect.

Square brackets are used to indicate additions or changes that the author has made to the text. For example, if you want to illustrate a point with a quotation it may be necessary to add a couple of words by way of explanation:

The new legislation means that they [software companies] may be liable for mistakes.

### **2.2 Avoid clichés**

A cliché is an expression that has been so overused that it has lost its force of meaning. Phrases such as "at the touch of a button" and "at their fingertips" should not appear in your work. (To use a cliché, they should be "avoided like the plague"!) If you feel tempted to write with a cliché, you are probably about to state the obvious, which is not worthwhile given the word limits on your work.

### **2.3 Avoid "journalese"**

Make sure that you have not written work in an exaggerated or sensational style: you are not a journalist! Your work should read as a measured set of rational arguments. If you say anything bold, this should be backed up with a reference from the literature you have consulted in preparing your work, or by an example that proves your point.

### **2.4 Avoid jargon**

Use the jargon of your subject area with precision, accuracy and constraint. Take special care with terms that have specialised meanings in your subject area. For example the terms "tacit" and "explicit" have specific meanings in the context of knowledge management.

### **2.5 The impersonal writer**

It is rare that you would be expected to write in the first person singular (using the word "I") when preparing essays and reports in the subject area of Computing. Some people get round



this by using the third person singular, but this can be very clumsy. You should aim to write impersonally. The idea is that you remove any personal bias from the argument when you write impersonally. Check the three sentences below to see how this is achieved:

1. I conducted a survey on the use of social media in schools. [First person singular]
2. The author conducted a survey on the use of social media in schools. [Third person singular]
3. A survey was conducted on the use of social media in schools. [Impersonal writing]

Note that some grammar checkers will question the use of the passive voice (i.e. how the verb is used in the last example given in the list above). It is argued that the use of the passive makes the text "heavy". This can be the case, and in many cases it is appropriate to use the "active" voice, for example in writing out an instruction leaflet or creating an exciting narrative in a work of fiction. However, in academic work the use of the passive voice is wholly appropriate when the goal is to present a set of arguments in an unbiased way. It also permits the construction of short, neat sentences. Consider the examples below:

1. The researchers administered the questionnaires over a period of three days. [Active voice]
2. It took three days to administer the questionnaires. [Passive voice]

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### **3. Forming arguments**

#### **3.1 Sensible use of paragraphs**

Assignment specifications give you few words to write up your essay or report. You must make the most of them. As you structure your work ensure that each section offers a different (yet related within the context of the assignment specification) perspective of the issue under discussion, and that you present a logical development of a clear line of thought.

A paragraph deals with just one topic or major point of an argument relevant to the essay or report. That topic or argument should normally be announced in the opening sentence. This is sometimes called the topic sentence. The sentences which immediately follow the topic sentence should expand and develop the statement, explaining its significance to the question in general. This opening statement and amplification should then be followed by evidence to support the argument being made. You should provide illustrative examples which are discussed as an explanation of the central idea. Alternatively you can quote a source that supports your argument. The last sentence of a paragraph should round off the consideration of the topic in some way. It may also contain some statement which links it to the one which follows.

Paragraphs should normally be between 50 words minimum and 200 words maximum in length. However, they might be longer if you were explaining a topic in considerable detail in an extended essay. Paragraphs should be long enough to develop a point, not just state it.

Consecutive paragraphs may be linked with terms such as "However" so as to provide a sense of continuity in your argument. However, if you are in any doubt, let them stand separately and speak for themselves.

The recommended organisation of a typical paragraph is:

1. opening topic sentence, i.e. main point given
2. explanation of topic sentence
3. supporting sentences that explain its significance
4. discussion of examples or evidence (citing authorities; drawing on empirical evidence, i.e. research carried out by others or, in the case of a dissertation, you; drawing on your own experience, for example from placement)
5. concluding sentence

Sometimes, even though you have a set of arguments crafted into good paragraphs, it is difficult to work out how to order them in the written up version of the report or essay. It is possible to play around with the structure by:

1. writing the main point of each paragraph on to separate pieces of card
2. experimenting with ordering the cards so that eventually associated cards end up next to each other in a logical sequence
3. writing on a separate sheet of paper the order of topics
4. numbering the topics on the sheet of paper to show a hierarchy which reflects the logic of the new order of paragraphs

You now have the order of the components of your assignment. You then have to consider how to link from one paragraph to the next in the text so that there is adequate signposting and guidance for the reader. You can check that the links work by:

1. underlining linking words and phrases
2. asking someone else to read through your work and asking that person to explain how the paragraphs relate to one another

A well-structured assignment typically has the following format:

- It begins with an introduction which provides the reader with the indication of the direction the report or essay will take before conclusions can be drawn
- Paragraph 1 that makes claims relevant to the question set and central to the overall argument of the work, presents evidence to back up claims made and ends with a linking statement to paragraph 2
- Paragraph 2, that makes claims relevant to the question set and central to the overall argument of the work, presents evidence to back up claims made and ends with a linking statement to paragraph 3
- Paragraph 3, that makes claims relevant to the question set and central to the overall argument of the work, presents evidence to back up claims made and ends with a linking statement to paragraph 4 *and so on until all the main points are made*
- It ends with a conclusion which relates back to the introduction where what the report set out to do was been noted. It concludes on the evidence presented in the main text of the report itself. It adds value to the work presented by making sense of the report's/essay's main points, showing the implications of the arguments made. No new material appears in a conclusion. It is a genuine conclusion and not a simple summary of the rest of the work.

Throughout the work the sequence of the argument is well sign-posted. This is achieved through sensible use of language (for example, "As the next example shows...", "It can therefore be concluded that..."), conciseness, reminders to the reader, as appropriate, of what the main arguments are, how this is amplified through the work and where they are heading. If your work requires you to use the report format you can sign-post your work through the use of clear headings with section numbering. It is much easier to do this if you compose your work at a keyboard, rather than hand-write your work and then type it up. It is also useful to be able to print work out regularly to get an overview of how the work is developing.

### **3.2 Repetition and waffle**

Repetition (or waffle) will not win marks. If you are tempted to use a phrase such as "As already mentioned", "As explained above" or (the dreadful) "aforementioned", check that you are only providing a link back to earlier arguments, rather than simply repeating them. If you are using repetition and waffle as a strategy to make your essay or report meet the recommended word length, you need to think carefully about how well you have prepared to write up your assignment. It is likely that you have not gathered enough information or read adequately for the assignment if this is the case.

### **3.3 Answer and analyse**

No matter how well presented your work is, to pass your assignments you must answer the questions set. The work that you present should be relevant to the discussion.

There is always some description in essays or reports for assignments, but it is the degree of analysis of what is described that is valued by those marking the work. This might be described as the "So what?" factor of your work. You will be rewarded for linking ideas together to draw conclusions, or discussing the implications of what you have described. You will be rewarded for questioning the material that you have researched for preparing your assignment. You will not be rewarded for simply listing everything that you have discovered on a topic. As you progress through undergraduate studies the degree of analytical ability assumes greater importance.