

1 Writing at M Level

Good practice in essay writing

People think that I can teach them style. What stuff it all is! Have something to say, and say it as clearly as you can. That is the only secret of style.

(Matthew Arnold, 1822–1888)

Introduction

This chapter presents an introduction to the conventions and expectations of academic writing at Masters Level. Good writing is inextricably linked to wide reading. You will learn a great deal about academic style through reading journal articles and other texts. However, some caution is needed as some journal articles are often written in ways that make the content inaccessible to the reader. Clarity of expression is essential. Some authors try very hard to be too ‘academic’. The result is that their writing is incomprehensible and sounds pompous and this should be avoided. As writers, we should aim for our readers to understand what we are writing about. Some articles in journals have to be read and re-read several times before they become even slightly comprehensible. This largely renders them useless, especially if the aim of the article is to impact on practice or advance social justice. Writing should be clear, concise, and complex terminology should be explained to the reader.

That said, it is important to remember that you are writing for an academic audience. Therefore, there are certain assumptions that you can make. For example, you do not need to spell out to readers that Key Stage 1 focuses on the education of pupils aged 5–7. They already know that! This is one example of unnecessary description. Generally, you should avoid

14 WRITING AT M LEVEL

description in your academic writing. For example, rather than describing a particular theory of learning, it is better to explore the criticisms of it. In other words, it is necessary to move from the descriptive level to the *reflective level*.

The focus of your writing should therefore be on exploring the issues related to the topic about which you are writing. Successful M Level writers focus on the issues and problems associated with the field of enquiry rather than describing it. The aim of academic writing at this level is to problematize, i.e. to explore the problems, issues and criticisms associated with the topic. Successful writers draw on a wide range of literature to do this effectively.

An essay on the history of Special Educational Needs would be very descriptive if it presented the reader with a description of the significant legislation of the past 30 years. To move this to the reflective level, the writer needs to explore the problems and issues associated with the legislation and the criticisms of the various Acts of Parliament. A study of the teaching of reading would be descriptive if it presented the reader with an overview of the stages through which children progress when they learn to read. A more reflective account would explore the criticisms of theoretical frameworks, which have been proposed as models of reading development. Successful students at M Level continuously question commonly held assumptions. They also explore the criticisms of theories, models, frameworks, legislation and new agendas.

Tutors need to feel the criticality within a piece of M Level writing. Successful writing will also challenge the reader's own thinking. The writer should explore the viewpoints in the literature and question them, dispute them or validate them. Theoretical frameworks and theories of learning should be questioned and criticized. Government publications and educational initiatives and agendas should be subjected to the same level of critical scrutiny. In short, successful writers take nothing for granted.

Tutor support

You will be offered tutorial support to enable you to complete your piece of work successfully. You will be offered both formative and summative assessment opportunities. The formative assessment is generally used to allow you to demonstrate planning, provide indicative references and show that you are 'on the right track'. Don't make the mistake of treating the summative assessment as an end in itself – it can be used as formative assessment towards a subsequent assignment.

Neither you nor your tutor want the work to fail. No one stands to gain through this. However, work that is not well written and is poorly expressed

cannot pass. Work that lacks critical discussion and is largely descriptive also cannot pass. Therefore, it is important that you make the best use of your tutorial time. A substantial part of tutorial discussions should focus on how you can develop a critical and reflective discussion. Your tutor will help you to question commonly held assumptions and will help you to engage in a critical manner with the field of enquiry. A knowledgeable tutor will introduce you to texts that will help you to generate a critical debate. It is vital that you make use of this tutorial support. Your tutor will have a great deal of experience in marking work at this level and in educational theory in general. However, the onus is on you to maintain contact with your tutor and to ensure that the focus of the tutorials is related to what you need. You need to be proactive and ensure that you ask the right questions in tutorial sessions that will help you to engage with the topic in a critical and thoughtful manner. Therefore it is essential that you do some reading prior to these sessions. Nothing is more irritating to a busy tutor than a student who comes to a tutorial unprepared and with a limited number of ideas. Your tutor will be more than happy to help you if you can also demonstrate that you have put in the same level of commitment.

Further advice on reading is given in Chapter 2 and on developing a critical voice in Chapter 6. The rest of this chapter will look at the technical issues associated with academic writing at M Level.

Key points

- Avoid excessive description in your work.
- Be critical – challenge viewpoints and question assumptions.
- Explore the issues associated with your field of enquiry.

Expression

It goes without saying that accurate expression is essential at this level. On a simplistic level, this means ensuring that your work is error-free. Tutors find it offensive to mark work with careless spelling and punctuation errors. This is clearly unacceptable. To avoid this, a critical friend should proofread your work carefully. Someone else reading your work will often spot mistakes that you have missed. It is not your tutor's responsibility to detect these types of errors, either at the draft stage or at the stage of final submission. Tutors cannot and should not be expected to engage in microscopic marking. Work presented to tutors should therefore be error-free.

16 WRITING AT M LEVEL

It is essential that you organize your work into logical paragraphs. A paragraph contains a number of points that are linked in some way. Tutors find it annoying when students present them with two-line paragraphs. Try to develop your paragraphs fully and at the end of each paragraph try to write a sentence that makes a link to the next paragraph. You will also need to develop an academic style of writing. To help to achieve this it is recommended that you write in the third person.

Exercise 1.1

Smith (2003) identifies over thirty variables that have been linked to underachievement such as socio-economic group and free school meal entitlement. Sammons et al. (1994) identified six groups of variables which linked socio-economic status and attainment including; pupils' personal characteristics, family structure, socio-economic factors; parent education, ethnicity and other. Baker (1998) believes that the main area for concern in underachievement is from low-income families. Kutnick (2000) argues that factors such as home background and school structures are influential. Tymms (2003) contend that the size of the school is an important factor.

(Case study A)

Explain how the writer uses a variety of language to introduce viewpoints from the literature. Suggest other ways in which this could have been achieved.

Structure

You need to plan your work carefully into various sections. Your assignment details may provide you with a writing frame, which will help you to structure your work. If you are not provided with a writing frame you will have to structure your own work into appropriate sections. For the purposes of this chapter it will be assumed that you are carrying out a traditional piece of empirical research, in which case the structure adopted could be as follows:

- Abstract
- Introduction

- Literature review
- Methodology
- Analysis
- Conclusion.

Abstract

This will be a short statement (approximately 150–200 words) where you outline the aims and purposes of your research study, your chosen research methods, including samples and your key findings.

Introduction

In the Introduction you should provide contextual information about the research institution. For example, you could include the size of the institution, data on attainment and achievement of learners and factors that influence this, such as the socio-economic context.

You then need to provide a rationale for your research. It is here where you tell the reader why you are researching your chosen topic. In essence, you are justifying the worth of your study. The rationale can be examined on two levels:

- 1 *The local context:* Tell the reader what the issues are within the research institution, for example, has there been a fall in standards in a particular subject? Have informal observations and conversations with colleagues led you to believe there is a problem with an aspect of learning? Have Ofsted reports identified issues within the institution? Has school performance data indicated that there is a problem with a particular area of learning? Try to support your rationale with evidence (such as school results tables, inspection reports and information from improvement plans).
- 2 *The national context:* This is where you draw on the literature to determine whether there is a national problem with the local issue you have described. For example, you may have identified in the local context that boys are underachieving in your school. This is also a national issue and is supported by a wide literature base. Therefore, introducing the reader to wider literature on the issue will strengthen the rationale for your research.

You then need to identify the aims of your research. These need to be expressed clearly and succinctly. Avoid the temptation to include too many aims. It is better to keep your study focused.

18 WRITING AT M LEVEL

Literature review

Start with an opening paragraph outlining the content to be covered in this section. In this section you will present the reader with an outline of the key literature related to your field of study. You need to discuss with your supervisor which key texts and writers you might cite in this section. However, you cannot include everything you read and you will need to define the parameters of your literature review. It is best if you can identify the key themes you intend to read about in the literature at the start, prior to doing any reading. (Further details on this, and other aspects of reading, are given in Chapter 2.) This will then give you a focus for your research. You need to identify the theories or theoretical frameworks you will include in this section. Clarify the theoretical content of your literature review through discussions with your tutor. Eaglen (Case study C) identifies the relevant theories in her study about a child with autism, as illustrated below:

Baron-Cohen (1995) suggests that people with autism have a lack of '*theory of mind*', or '*mind-blindness*' which means that they cannot recognize the mental states of others.

Once you have identified the relevant theories, you can then develop a critical discussion of the theories. You can explore the criticisms/limitations of the theories in the literature and you can apply the theories to a practical context. It is important that you are able to demonstrate an understanding of the inter-relationship between educational theory and practice.

Exercise 1.2

In the example above, how could the writer have made links between theory of mind and practice?

Organise your literature review into sub-sections using sub-headings. You need to aim to produce a critical review of the literature. A good way to proceed is to model your literature review on a funnel. Start by citing the broader literature on the topic, then narrow the focus by concentrating on one or two key articles, which you can use as a basis for a critical discussion. (Further advice on how to produce a critical discussion is provided in Chapter 6.) The literature review should end with a summary of the key research findings.

Methodology

Start with an opening paragraph outlining the content to be covered in this section. In the methodology section you need to justify your research

methods to the reader. However, you also need to acknowledge the limitations of these methods. You need to discuss ethical issues associated with your research and how you have addressed these. You need to discuss the specific procedures you adopted, such as your sampling strategy, sample sizes, methods of data collection and data analysis. You also need to show the reader how you have made your research valid and reliable. Acknowledge the limitations of your study in this section. Organize this section into appropriate sub-sections using sub-headings and draw on the literature written about methodology throughout this section. The methodology section should end with a summary of the research methods to be adopted and the samples used in the research. (Further detailed advice on methodology is provided in Chapter 4.)

Analysis

Start with an opening paragraph outlining the content to be covered in this section. Try to organize your research findings into themes. These can be explored as sub-headings. Therefore prior to writing this chapter it is necessary to identify the themes which have emerged from your data. Decide, on the data you are going to present. You cannot present it all! Data can be presented in the form of quotations from interviewees, field notes in the case of observational work and graphs, charts and tables for numerical data. Then you need to discuss your findings. Discuss the implications of your findings for a range of stakeholders *and relate your findings to literature*. You need to summarize the key findings at the end of this section.

Conclusion

Summarize your key findings in relation to the original aims of your study, as outlined in the Introduction. Then discuss how you intend to disseminate your findings in order to impact on practice, particularly for the research institution. Then discuss if any further research is needed and what form this might take.

Key points

- Your work should make use of sub-headings throughout. These act as signposts for the reader.
- Draw on literature throughout your study, not just in the literature review.

20 WRITING AT M LEVEL

Plagiarism

You need to avoid plagiarism in the production of your academic work. Plagiarism can take many forms. If you plagiarize, you could be guilty of one or more of the following:

- Presenting the ideas of others as if they are your own (citing arguments from the literature without proper acknowledgement).
- Using the words of others without proper acknowledgement.
- Copying the work of another student.
- Resubmitting your own work or parts of it (in the case of assignment work which has been submitted as credit towards an award and is then resubmitted to gain further credit towards the same or a different award). This is known as self-plagiarism.
- Allowing other students to copy your work, in the sense that you could be accused of aiding plagiarism.
- Inventing false data.
- Making up references.
- Accessing material on the web and presenting it as your own.
- Ghost writing: paying someone else to do the work for you.
- Presenting lecture notes as your own work as part of an assignment.

This list is not exhaustive and your own HEI will have its own rules that will be shared with you. There will also be a policy or a statement in your student handbook and it is recommended that you read this very carefully. You will usually be required to sign a statement to the effect that the work is your own, and not copied or plagiarized in any way. Plagiarism is an academic offence and it is important that you do not fall into this trap. Quite often students will plagiarize without realizing what they have done. This is because they might not understand how to reference material properly. The library or the faculty will produce a referencing guide and you are advised to read this very carefully.

Key points

- Ensure that you know how to reference work properly.
- Never present the words and viewpoints of others without crediting them to an author.
- Read and ensure you understand the university policy or statement on plagiarism.

Use of references

Universities will recommend a referencing system and one of the most widely adopted is the Harvard system. The Harvard system explains how references should be cited, both within the text and in the list of references. The Harvard system of referencing shows the author's name and the date of the work in brackets, e.g. (Smythe 2003). (Beware! There are not only different versions of Harvard, but also other systems, such as Vancouver, using only notes. Be sure you know the conventions of your own HEI.) It is expected that you will read widely and cite references throughout your work. This is a way of demonstrating to your tutor how much research you have done. References also enable you to support the claims you make. Examples of supported claims are shown below:

Research has found that if classroom support assistants are well trained and supported in their duties, they offer the potential to make inclusion effective for a range of children with special educational needs (Farrell, Balshaw and Polat 1999).

Research has also found that inclusion is often inadequately addressed and often neglected in initial teacher training programmes (Barton 2003; Booth et al 2003; Garner 2001; Jones 2002; Thomas and Loxley 2001).

You should avoid vague phrases such as *research has found that ...* without supporting this. Students are often guilty of making sweeping generalizations in their work, without backing them up with research and literature. Examples of these are listed as follows:

Many headteachers in primary schools lack an understanding of effective early year's pedagogy.

Many teacher-training programmes do not give sufficient focus to Special Educational Needs.

Boys prefer to read non-fiction texts and like to learn outdoors.

While these claims may ring true from your own classroom experience, statements like these are likely to encourage tutors to ask *How do you know?* and *Where is your evidence?* Therefore, claims must be backed up with research and literature. Your own HEI will have a guide to referencing available. [For an example, go to www.wols.hud.ac.uk/cls/docs/helpsheets/Referencing.pdf where you will find the University of Huddersfield's excellent guide.]

The list of references is a list of all the texts you have specifically cited in the essay. The bibliography is a list of all the texts you have read but not cited within the essay.

22 WRITING AT M LEVEL

Referencing within the text

Paraphrasing

You will find it useful throughout your work to use paraphrases. This is where you summarize someone's argument in your own words, i.e. you are not making a direct quotation. When you are paraphrasing, you do not need to give a page number. It is only necessary to give the surname of the author and the date of the text where the argument was cited.

Exercise 1.3

It is widely acknowledged that parental involvement impacts on a child's attainment (Douglas 1964; Plowden 1967).

Haverman and Wolfe (1995) found that children of parents with a high level of education performed better than children with less educated parents.

What two ways does the student use here to paraphrase an argument?
In the first paraphrase, how does the author validate the underlined phrase?

Direct quotations

Generally you are only advised to use a direct quotation if it says something really important. You should avoid the temptation to use too many quotations in your work. Lengthy quotations should also be avoided. One sure way to irritate a tutor is to include a quotation with no further discussion of it. If a quotation is worthy of being cited in your work, it is worthy of discussion. Quotations with no introduction are also equally irritating, as in the following example:

Inclusion will certainly happen increasingly over the first part of the new century ... The desegregationist and anti-discriminatory political environment is now international and it seems impossible that its direction will be reversed.

(Thomas 1997: 106)

This needs to be placed in context, so there should be an opening phrase such as: 'Literature indicates that inclusion has now taken hold'.

Long quotations

The following example taken from Case study B illustrates that long quotations should be separated from the text and indented. Quotations should be properly referenced with the surname of the author (initials of first name are not necessary), the date of text from which the quote was taken and a page number (Harvard referencing). It is not necessary to cite the title of the text as this will be given in the list of references. Quotation marks are not needed for indented quotations. Some students prefer to put quotes in italics and tutors may have preferences about this. However, the key is to be consistent throughout the work so that all quotes are set out in the same way. Indented quotations are generally presented using single line spacing and the reference is generally positioned at the bottom of the quotation near the right-hand side, on a new line, as shown below:

There is an argument about modelling which suggests that teachers are merely providing an opportunity for pupils to reproduce the presented task or process without internalizing it. In defence, Swanwick argues that this is not necessarily a negative facet:

Imitation is not mere copying, but includes sympathy, empathy, identification with, concern for, seeing ourselves as something or someone else. It is the activity in which we enlarge our repertoire of action and thought ... [Imitation] is certainly not hostile to creative imagination.

(Swanwick 1988: 45)

Exercise 1.4

- How effective is the writer's introduction of the quote?
- Suggest ways in which this could be made more effective.
- In what other way could the quote be referenced?

The reference and page number for quotations can also be placed before the quotation, as in the following example. However, the key is to be consistent:

Wilson (1999: 111) argues that:

The more radically we come to see the school as a community which primarily has a social function, roughly to make everyone feel 'included' whatever activity they undertake, this is substantially

24 WRITING AT M LEVEL

different from seeing a school primarily as a learning community. A learning community exists for a certain purpose – to promote learning – and will attend to and value its clients as learners, not just as people in general. The hard, inescapable fact is that learning, however broadly defined, is a particular kind of human activity ...which different people may be more or less good at.

Short quotations

Short quotations do not need to be indented and can fit smoothly within the text. Single quotation marks should be used and a reference for the quotation should be provided indicating the surname of the author, the date of the text from which the quote was taken and a page number. Again, it is not necessary to give the title of the text, as this will appear in the list of references. Some examples of short quotations from Case study A are listed below:

Feinstein and Symons (1999: 306) contend that ‘variables such as class size and teacher experience are usually found to have little effect on attainment’.

Gorard and Smith (2004: 216) argue that ‘the overwhelming majority of variance in school results is predicted by the nature (or prior attainment) of the intake’.

Baker et al. (2003: 77) argue that ‘there are troublesome conceptual issues involved in identifying membership of social classes’.

Exercise 1.5

Sometimes it is possible to put the reference after the quote. The following example provides an illustration:

It has been argued that ‘the interaction in focus groups emphasises empathy and commonality of experiences and fosters self-disclosure and self-validation’ (Madriz 1998: 116).

Look at the following quote from Case study B:

Kerry (1998) describes explaining as ‘a complicated process’ and insists that ‘those who want to become good at it must analyse, practise and acquire the skills involved’ (Kerry 1998: 120).

How could this be re-worded so that the reader is only introduced to the author after the quotation?

Secondary referencing

Secondary referencing is where you cite the research or viewpoint of an author but have not read the original text where that research or viewpoint was originally cited. Instead you have read about their work in another text. You should keep secondary references to a minimum. Where possible, you should consult the original text. This is because in secondary referencing you are only reading someone's interpretation of another's work. It is not always possible to access all the texts so some degree of secondary referencing will be inevitable, in which case you need to make it clear to the reader that you have not consulted the original text. Some examples of how to do this are shown below:

Bullough (1998) writes about this when he argues that:

We cannot write just anything we wish ... interpretations, however tentative, must be disciplined by data, and ... we must proceed cautiously and carefully before proclaiming a plot.

(Bullough 1998, in Goodson and Sikes 2001: 56)

Goodson and Sikes (2001) cite Plummer (1995) who has written about the way in which life stories can also be empowering to the reader.

It is clear that the rationale for life history research is based on solid arguments. Goodson and Sikes (2001: 99) cite McLaughlin and Tierney (1993), who argues that narrative research allows individuals to 'name their silenced lives'.

A perceptive comment is made by Hargreaves (1997) who is critical of the political demand for more quantitative data by arguing that it can 'promote a narrowly utilitarian and philistine approach to research and intellectual life' (cited in Hughes 2003: 11).

Using *ibid.*

In academic texts you will often see *ibid.* used when referencing paraphrases or quotes. *Ibid.* is short for *ibidem*, Latin for 'in the same place'. This is used when the writer is citing an author's work that has previously been cited elsewhere in the study. In the example, Bentley (Case study B) makes use of this convention: 'When teachers try to explain too much, they can often be met by the "enemy... the limited size of the student's short-term memory"'

26 WRITING AT M LEVEL

(Petty *ibid.*)'. Therefore, Bentley has previously cited this text and page number in the study immediately preceding this quotation, so there is no need to write out the full reference again. *Ibid.* is used only if the immediately preceding reference is the same as the *ibid.* reference. Writers may also use *op. cit.* (*opere citato* – from the work cited). However, you should note that the use of either of these conventions could be confusing. If at all in doubt, there is no need to use them – they tend to add nothing and may even detract from sense.

Completing the list of references

Follow the procedures for setting out a list of references laid down by your own institution. In particular, note carefully how to set out references for books, journal articles, web-based material, government publications and newspaper articles. References are set out in alphabetical order, using single line spacing, with a space between each reference. Different types of sources are generally listed together, so there is no need to list books together, then journal articles and so on. Tutors will check that all sources in the essay appear in the list of references and they will also check for a balanced list of sources such as books, journal articles and web-based sources.

Extended project

Find a critical friend to work with throughout the duration of your course. Ask your critical friend to proofread your academic work. Ask them to suggest ways of improving the work.

Key points

- Do not make unsupported claims or assertions. These must be supported with research and literature.
- Check your referencing guide and set out quotes and paraphrases according to its conventions.
- Avoid the over-use of secondary referencing.