

Academic writing

The information on these pages has been developed as part of the Teaching International Students project





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1. Introduction

International students often bring unique perspectives and valuable insights to their writing. They can, if encouraged to do so, draw upon their varied backgrounds and experiences; most will use writing in diverse contexts after graduation. By writing in English as a second or third language, they demonstrate the capacity of English as an international language and are likely to value its use on graduation. Such benefits are usually acquired through considerable individual effort by students, and teaching, support and guidance by others.

This section notes some of the issues which international students can find particularly challenging in academic writing and suggests ways that teachers can assist international students to become successful writers. You will find additional resources relevant to teaching academic writing in other sections of the International Student Lifecycle resources bank. See Language, Reading and note-making, Assessment and feedback, Supervision and Avoiding plagiarism sections.

2. The main issues for students

Most students find writing difficult and some international students report that their difficulties continue, even years after their confidence in other academic skills such as speaking, listening, and reading has grown (Zhang, 2010). Explanations for students' struggle go beyond grammar and vocabulary though these are clearly significant. One student probably speaks for many in linking language and identity:

"I know how to say it in English as well, but I know a better way to say it in [my native language]. It's more like a childish way if you see what I mean. I know how to say it in English in very basic way ... sometimes I feel like I am five years backwards when I am writing in English ... to me when I read it, it is like someone with less education than I have or would have written."

Most writing specialists agree that writing difficulties are down to the 'specialised nature of academic discourse' (Schmitt, 2005, p.65) and to the complexity of the craft of writing itself.

At the micro-level, international student writers choose words, create sentences, link paragraphs and weave in evidence, all of which are more difficult in an unfamiliar language. At the macro-level, they use the correct discourse style of the discipline as they attend to structure, and coherence which are aspects more akin to socialisation in the discipline. For some international students, prior educational experience provides little or no practice in either type of task. For others, previous writing approaches rested upon different assumptions and conventions which are very difficult to set aside. For example, Paltridge and Starfield (2007), in a guide to supervisors of students writing in a second language, refer to 'English writing ... as writer-responsible where it is the writer's responsibility to make the text clear to the reader' (p.12) rather than assume shared knowledge. Student writers from reader-responsible traditions explain, 'I didn't say that because I thought you already knew it' (p.12). Schmidt (2005) describes a Brazilian PhD student as 'aghast' and frustrated at being required to forgo her previous 'creative' use of language to meet her UK supervisor's expectations which 'prevented [her] from including an important element of herself in her writing' (p. 66).

International students also report issues with their:

- **Research skills** which mean they are able to identify and read authoritative sources of evidence.
- **Note-making skills** which ensure they take the meaning from a source rather than simply copying the text.

- **Self-management** to pace the writing, allowing time for drafting and correction. This might include help from study skills tutors and/or English support services.
- **Drafting and revision**, including editing language.

Given all this complexity, many students will need teacher-support and guidance to go beyond adopting the superficial style markers of academic writing. The goal is to help students develop technical writing skills, to strengthen their language capabilities, and to develop their sense of self as academic writers. It is also to deter the few who might adopt strategies which threaten learning such as choosing courses to avoid coursework assessment, paying someone to write for them, or plagiarism.

3. The main issues for teachers: getting started

Most teachers see their primary responsibility as teaching content and discipline-specific knowledge yet many recognise the challenges students face as novice academic writers, especially when language and cultural differences are also involved. Solutions lie in finding ways to integrate teaching content and craft, since students' writing difficulties stem from a combination of generic lack of experience or skill; little or no experience of reading academic texts; and lack of familiarity with the disciplinary conventions, including those for writing.

Approaches for developing international students' academic writing mirror those for all academic skills, including:

- **empathy and knowledge** about students' transitions to UK academic writing conventions
- **patience** while students develop their language capability
- **assessment strategies** which include exemplars, formative feedback, and practice (see assessment and feedback section)
- **organisation** to ensure students know what is expected and deadlines for completion that are mindful that many will take significantly longer than home students.

Assessments and writing tasks may need to be analysed to match students' developing language capability. Are they able to survey and assimilate source material? Are instructions explicit and clear? Are stages included where students can gain feedback and adjust their text?

Teachers also encounter issues when marking and assessing students' written work. See Assessment and feedback and Avoiding plagiarism sections of the International Student Lifecycle resources bank for further discussion and possible solutions.

4. Possible solutions: suggestions for action

Entry-level English examinations offer only a sketchy indication of a student's writing ability. However, programmes can be structured to identify what student writers can and cannot do when they begin, then identify who and where additional help can be offered, either by individual teachers or through referral to specialists. Identification might be planned at programme level but is likely to be done through course-level actions such as diagnostic assignments, discussions of writing styles and structure, or explicit reference to features in academic texts which students are expected to reproduce. In some cases, diagnosis is via 'study skills' type courses and in others, through collaboration with English Language Support specialists who may deliver writing related elements.

The link between writing and reading is clear: reading improves vocabulary and grammar and provides a model for writing in the discipline. Students are much more likely to spot features and build a personal glossary if teachers point them out in their use of texts in class, discuss the readings with this aim in mind, and select readings which serve as good models.

Writing well requires practise and feedback, both of which can be designed into courses using a variety of techniques such as peer review, writing partnerships, brief 1:1 tutorials and targeted feedback, not all of which require teachers' own time (though many do). Feedback needs to focus on a few key messages, ensuring that strengths and good features are recognised as well as areas for development. Whilst grammar and vocabulary are important, too much emphasis on this in feedback is likely to leave the student confused and demoralised and may take the emphasis away from content, structure and criticality which are the markers of academic writing in a particular discipline. Academic literacy relies on mastering the skills for thinking and making a case in writing and less on being able to do so accurately in English.

5. Top Tip

Think about referring students to one of the huge range of specialist guides providing advice on academic writing but be sure they know that academic writing is more than just technical skills. Nevertheless, lacking them can block students' developing in other ways.

Guides for non-native speakers stress language aspects and are often written in a more straightforward way but many students say they find generic guidance equally useful. Deciding or advising your own students on which to use probably depends on you knowing the range. Try asking specialists within the university (study skills advisers, Librarians and English Language teachers), check Library stocks, or request review copies from publishers who are often happy to provide these if you can make a case for subsequent use. Many on-line versions exist, such as that at [Colorado State University](#) in the US and [discipline-specific guides](#).

Students will make much better use of writing guides if you contextualise the advice, provide incentives through classroom discussion or feedback, and ask for students' experiences and feedback on their utility. A good guide might save you time, improve the type of questions which students ask when seeking help, and above all, enhance the students' chances of success.

6. What's the evidence?

6.1 Top resources

Schmidt, D. (2005) Writing in the international classroom, in Teaching International Students: Improving learning for all, Carroll, J. & Ryan J. (Eds.). Routledge: London.

Paltridge, B. and Starfield, S. (2007) Thesis and dissertation writing in a second language: A handbook for supervisors. Routledge: Abingdon, Oxon.

6.2 Further Reading

Grayson, P. (2011) Cultural capital and achievement of Chinese international and Canadian domestic students in a Canadian business programme. *International Journal of Management Education* v.9 n.2 *This small case study looks at how writing confidence links to other aspects of students' prior study and life*

Lea, L. and Street, B. (1998) Student Writing in Higher Education: An academic literacies approach. *Studies in Higher Education*, 23(2) 157-17. *A classic and much cited study of academic literacy and writing*

Lillis, T. and Scott, M. (2007) Defining academic literacies research: Issues of epistemology, ideology and strategy. *Journal of Applied Linguistics*, 4(1) 5–32.

Swales, J. and Feak, C. (2004) *Academic Writing for Graduate Students: Essential tasks and skills* (2nd Edn) Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press. *This is a much cited and valued book for second language postgraduate writers*

[Thinking Writing](#). Queen Mary's, University of London *This website collects resources and research in writing in the context of the discipline.*

Whitley, E. and Grous, A. (2009) Academic writing by 'international' students in the internet age: Studying diversity in practice. *International journal of innovation in education*, 1(1) 12-34.

Zhang, Y. and Mi, Y. (2010) Another look at the language difficulties of international students. *Journal of Studies in International Education*, 14(4), 371-388

7. Related resources

[International Students, Academic Writing & Plagiarism website](#)

[Learning academic writing and skills of argument video by Iain Coyne et al University of Nottingham](#)

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