# Quick guide to academic writing

Academic writing is a style of writing that needs to be developed. What is expected of you changes as you progress through your course and move up the levels.

This is a brief, generic introduction to:

1. Understanding the task
2. Reading and notetaking
3. Planning and structure
4. Writing the first draft
5. Editing
6. Being critical

WRITING AT UNIVERSITY
Planning, structure, academic style and editing
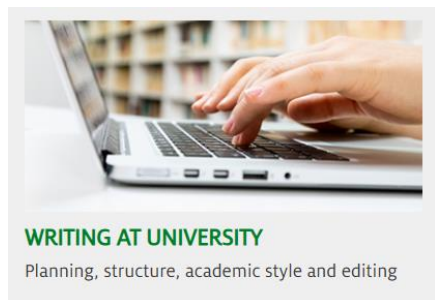
It also signposts the range of resources created by the skills@cumbria team. All of the resources mentioned can be found on: **https://my.cumbria.ac.uk/skills**

Further support can also be found on Assessment support

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1. Understanding what is required

- Take a look at the University **Assignment guidelines** which cover formatting, online submission: specifically, Appendix 3C.

- Check your assignment brief for the Learning outcomes and assignment guidance.

- Know your submission date and work out a timetable for researching, reading and writing, allowing time for editing. Breaking your assignment into small chunks makes it more achievable. Time management is key to academic success.

- Print off your Learning Outcomes (LO) and pin them where you can see them. It is essential that you meet all of the LOs; missing even one will mean a fail. Make sure you understand what they mean; clarify with your module lead if you're not sure.

- Make sure you know what type of assignment you have. The format may be an essay, a report, a presentation or reflective writing. Each of these requires a different approach and more information on these can be found on **Writing at university.**

- Understand what the assignment is asking you to do. The clue is often in the "Instruction" word in the title. For example: *Discuss the importance of* … Or *Critically evaluate* … More examples of instruction words are provided on our **Essay page.**

- Brainstorm/ Mindmap / Spider diagram. Whatever you call it and however you do it (post its, Mindmapping software or a large sheet of paper and a pen), find a way to record the assignment title, LOs, what you already know and what you need to find out to answer the question. This will help you to be more targeted with your reading.

- **Assignment guidelines:** https://my.cumbria.ac.uk/assignmentinfo
- **Time management** : https://v3.pebblepad.co.uk/spa/#/public/94jgbwctZzdmHxxkfgHrGt4h9r
- **Writing at university:** https://my.cumbria.ac.uk/academic-writing
- **Essays:** https://my.cumbria.ac.uk/academic-essays

2. Read and take notes

- There is no short cut, you have to read around the topic to decide what points need to go in your assignment. One of the differences in writing at university is that every point must be supported by good quality evidence, not just opinion. Without evidence you can't write an evidence-based, academic assignment.

- Start with your module reading list for the key texts. Start with some broad reading to get an overview of your topic and then use **OneSearch** to hone specific reading to answer a particular aspect. Make sure you use academic resources, rather than random sources you find on the web. Our **Finding information** page has much more on this topic.

- Start early! This gives you time to build your knowledge base and make connections between various sources, placements and your Learning Outcomes. Make yourself comfortable and break your work into timed chunks.

- Reading at university is different to reading for pleasure as you rarely read an academic book from cover to cover. You use the chapters, index and keywords to identify the most relevant parts of a text. Previous students have shared their top reading tips on our **Reading and notetaking** page.

- Reading is an active exercise: you need to engage and interact with the reading, asking questions and taking notes. Highlighting can be a useful tool but for truly understanding and summarising the key information, notetaking needs to be part of your information processing. There are different styles of notetaking and examples can be found on our **Reading and notetaking** page.

- Make sure you record all the referencing details for every source you have read. You will need them to write your assignment. Our **Referencing** page has lots of information.

- **Reading and notetaking:** https://my.cumbria.ac.uk/academic-reading
- **Critical reading:** https://my.cumbria.ac.uk/being-critical
- **Referencing**: https://my.cumbria.ac.uk/referencing

3. Planning and structure

- What have you learnt? What information do you need to give to answer your assignment and meet your Learning outcomes (LO)?

- A mindmap is useful at this stage too, recording how you are going to break up your main points into sub-points. Add your evidence to the relevant point and map to the LOs.

- Can you then turn this into a linear plan which identifies what you are going to talk about in which order? This provides a series of headings with your evidence listed: a map to help you navigate your content. If you find it difficult to plan and just need to start writing, use a **reverse outline** afterwards; see section 5.

- Each heading will become a separate paragraph, focussing on one main point per paragraph. Paragraphs are really useful for organising your thinking and leading the reader through a logical, structured discussion: your line of thinking.

- An academic essay normally has an introduction, main body formed of a series of paragraphs, and a conclusion. How many words you assign to each section will depend on the assignment guidance and marking grid. If the introduction is assigned 5% of the mark, then give it roughly 5% of the words. The same applies to each LO or section depending on how the assignment has been structured.

- A report or reflective piece will have a different structure; check out the specific information for these assignment types on **Writing at university**

- **Writing at university:** https://my.cumbria.ac.uk/academic-writing
- **Using your literature**: https://stream.cumbria.ac.uk/ap/Skills/Reading/Using_Your_Literature/story_html5.html
- **Making your notes count**: https://stream.cumbria.ac.uk/ap/Skills/Reading/Making_your_notes_count/story_html5.html

4. Write the first draft.

- Don't complete this the night before your submission date! You need to allow time to come back to your draft and edit.

- That blank bit of paper can be daunting so just start Writing, you can edit it later. You don't need to start at the beginning: start on a section you feel most confident with and build it up that way. Think of the way films are shot out of sequence and then spliced together at the end.

- Take your heading and flesh out the point you want to make in that paragraph, supported by your evidence. Good notes come in useful here as they provide the basis for your writing. See the resources box for some relevant videos. <u>Make sure you remove your headings from the final version</u>—unless it is a report.

- There are many **paragraphing** acronyms e.g. PEEL (see the **Writing at university** page). Essentially each paragraph should have one main point, which is made clear in the opening sentence. Then evidence, which you analyse, discuss or apply, depending on your assignment brief. Finish with a summary and/or a link to your next point.

- In this way each paragraph forms a mini essay which is linked to the next point. Linking your paragraphs to show your thinking or argument, helps the reader (and marker) navigate through. Revisit this if you are writing out of order.

- There is a tendency to try and sound "academic" but it is more important to make your point clearly, supported by the evidence. Your academic voice will develop over time, along with your subject or professional terminology. Avoid using colloquial or chatty phases and avoid "I" unless it is reflective writing.

- The introduction is where you set the context and layout how you will answer the question. It can help to write this at the end, when you know what you have said. If you wrote it at the start, revisit it.

- Your conclusion will pull together key points you have made during the main body; add nothing new apart from maybe recommendations or an action plan if required.

5. Editing: *Write without fear, edit without mercy*

- No writer submits their first draft; every book and article you read will have been extensively honed and edited. You need to allow time to do the same.

- Try to leave time between writing the first draft and revisiting it. This gives you a chance to see it with fresh eyes and be more objective. Printing it out also helps to gain some distance and also gives you the option of scribbling over it.

- Don't try and do everything at once, revisit it a few times with a different purpose each time.

- Start with the overall structure. If you have deviated from your plan or you didn't have one, use a **Reverse outline** to check the best order. For this, note by each paragraph what it is about in a couple of words (or highlight your topic sentence). This shows what you wrote about in what order. Do you need to move things or merge paragraphs if they are duplicating the same point. Maybe you are covering too much and the paragraph needs splitting? If your paragraph takes a whole page, that is a clue you need to split it. Short, three line paragraphs may need to merge with others.

- Look at your argument. Are your paragraphs linked in a way that leads your reader through your argument? Is every point relevant to your assignment and Learning Outcomes? If not cut.

- Often a first draft has too many words. The steps above should help to remove duplication and irrelevant points, but you can **eliminate wordiness** too by removing unnecessary words; see the link in **Resources box.**

- Check your evidence. Is every point supported by a citation that is correctly formatted?

- Is your grammar, spelling and punctuation correct? Read it out loud or use a screen reader function. This will help to identify where the pauses should be and if a sentence doesn't flow. Note what you find challenging, for example if your sentences tend to be too long, and keep an eye on this.

6. Being critical

- Your assignment feedback may highlight that you are being too descriptive and need to be more critical. Being critical is a state of mind that you will develop as you move up the levels and at its core it involves *questioning everything*. Think of April Fool's Day when we take nothing at face value and check the stories that appear to see if they are real or just jokes. Criticality starts with your reading and note taking: question what you read, link it to your experience, *compare* and *contrast* to other sources. Use critical questions (found on our **Critical page**) to *evaluate* the literature.

- When it comes to writing, try to focus on the **WHY** and **HOW,** rather than reporting the **WHAT** and **WHEN** which may lead to descriptive writing. Only use description to set the scene.

- When you are presenting your evidence, don't just report what an author says but *interpret* it for your context and identify its *significance,* **ie** why have you included it? Why is it worth writing about? How does it impact on practice?

- Critical writing has more *depth*; it doesn't just skim the surface but covers fewer points in more detail. It tends to have an "argument" or stance, and that critical "voice" gets stronger as you move up the levels.

These are all skills that you will develop over time. Our **Being critical** page has lots more information

- **Being critical**: https://my.cumbria.ac.uk/being-critical
- **Editing section**: https://my.cumbria.ac.uk/academic-writing
- **Reverse outline:** Reverse Outline-20210908_085036.mp4
- **Eliminating wordiness:**
  https://sass.queensu.ca/resources/online/eliminating-wordiness
- **Grammar, spelling and punctuation;**
  https://my.cumbria.ac.uk/Student-Life/Learning/Skills-Cumbria/Academic-Writing/Spelling-Grammar/

Presenting your work

- Font size 12
- Clear font e.g. Arial or Verdana
- Double or 1 ½ line spacing
- Leave 2 lines between paragraphs
- Provide appropriate margins
- Reference using correct style. *Cite them right* for most courses
- Provide a reference list

Further support from Skills@cumbria

Feedback Tutorial	This tutorial shows you how to use the feedback from your lecturers to improve your writing. https://my.cumbria.ac.uk/Student-Life/Learning/Skills-Cumbria/Learn-Well-at-Cumbria/Working-with-feedback/
Headstart	Headstart is a set of online tutorials that you can work through at your own pace. They cover each level and are a good way to develop your academic skills. https://my.cumbria.ac.uk/Student-Life/New-Students/headstart/
Feedback on 500 words	Send your assignments to skills@cumbria.ac.uk or use the Student Enquiry Point. Identify which 500 words you want us to look at and any particular aspect you want us to focus on. We don't proofread and can't comment on your mark, but we can suggest key areas to develop.
Appointments	We provide 30 minute 121 appointments through Teams. Book here: https://uoc-advocate.symplicity.com/
Webinars	We provide Webinars on many topics. Check the Webinar page for the current schedule. https://my.cumbria.ac.uk/skillswebinars

Skills@cumbria. December 2025