

Students Must Write

A guide to better writing in
coursework and examinations

Third edition

Robert Barrass

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Students Must Write

If you are to do well as a student, and progress in your chosen career, the ability to express yourself clearly, concisely and persuasively in writing is a skill you should be trying to develop.

Students Must Write is a guide to better writing for students of all subjects. It may be read either as an alternative to a course on written communication or to complement such a course. Tutors who have recommended earlier editions to their students will find that this new edition continues to provide a straightforward introduction to the essentials of scholarly writing. Changes have not been made simply for the sake of change, but all chapters have been updated where necessary – especially in relation to the increasing importance of computers in retrieving information and in preparing coursework assignments.

You will find straightforward advice on the choice and use of words; on how to write for easy reading; on how to use numbers, tables and illustrations to complement your words; on how to cite sources of information and list bibliographic details of these sources; on how to answer questions in coursework, tests and examinations; on how to write a dissertation, long essay, term paper, project report or thesis; on how to write letters and applications; on using a computer as an aid to writing; and on punctuation and spelling.

The exercises headed *Improve your writing*, at the end of most chapters, can be undertaken by students working alone or used by tutors as a basis for group work in courses on written communication.

Robert Barrass has many years' experience of helping students on degree and diploma courses at the University of Sunderland to improve their writing and other key skills. His other books on key skills, published by Routledge, include *Study! A Guide to Effective Learning*, *Revision and Examination Techniques*.

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Preface

The ability to express yourself is an essential basis for success as a student, when applying for employment and in any career. In all academic subjects students must write, and all teachers and lecturers should encourage their students to write well. This book, therefore, is for all students: both (a) for those who know that their written work does not give a true indication of their ability, who accept that if they could improve their writing they could score higher marks in all coursework and examinations, and (b) for those who although satisfied that they write well are prepared to consider the possibility of improvement. By improving their writing all students should be able to improve the quality of their thinking – because writing and thinking are very closely associated – and by submitting better written work for assessment they should achieve higher grades.

In this third edition account is taken of the increasing use of computers over the past ten years, for information retrieval and in preparing written assignments as part of coursework. The order of presentation reflects the changing needs of students from the first to the final year of a degree or diploma course. I hope it will help all students, whether they are continuing their education soon after leaving school, studying part-time while in employment, or returning to college or university after a period in full-time employment. Changes have been made in all chapters, and some have been completely revised, but my purpose has not changed: this is to provide a guide to better writing that students can read, perhaps one chapter each week when they start a college or university course, and then keep to hand for reference whenever they need help with their writing.

Most chapters end with a section headed *Improve your writing* which includes exercises that may be undertaken by students working alone or used by tutors as ideas for use in their courses on written communication.

Acknowledgements

This book is based on my experience as a principal lecturer at the University of Sunderland. I write not as a grammarian but as a teacher, tutor and administrator. My intention is to help students of all subjects to think clearly and to express their thoughts effectively in writing.

For their help in preparing this third edition, I thank Jonathan Barrass who advised on the use of computers as an aid to planning and writing; Jane Moore of the University of Sunderland's Murray Library who read the typescript for the chapter on finding and using information; both Margaret Parsons of the School of Education and Lifelong Learning and Robert Jewitt of the School of Languages, Communications and Culture who read the whole typescript; and both Trevor Hartley and Norman Catcherside of the School of Health, Natural and Social Sciences who gave IT support and advice. I also thank Adrian Burrows who drew the cartoons; and Ann, my wife, for her interest, encouragement and help in preparing successive editions.

The comments on the writing of 18-year-old students in the UK, included in chapters 1 and 10, are based on examiners' reports. But the examples of poor English included in chapters 3 and 6, with suggested improvements, are all from books – some from books on writing – not from the written work of students. Like Gowers (1986), I do not give the source of such extracts.

1 Judged by your writing

If your long-term objective in study is to achieve your full potential, and obtain the highest grades of which you are capable, consider three reasons why many students underachieve.

- 1 Some lack motivation, and do not work hard enough.
- 2 Many attend classes and work hard, but have poor time management skills and do not study effectively.
- 3 More do study effectively and know their work, yet underachieve because they pay insufficient attention to improving their ability to communicate their thoughts in writing.

Effective writing as the basis for success

Writing is important in studying all subjects, and in all professions. Only by writing well can you give a good account of yourself as a student or when applying for employment, or in a career when writing e-mails, memoranda, letters, instructions and reports. It is by your writing that many people judge you (see Table 1.1).

If you are to achieve your full potential as a student, and progress in your chosen career, the ability to express yourself clearly, concisely and persuasively in writing is an essential skill that you should be trying to develop.

As a student you write with a pen for several hours each day, making notes in lectures, practical classes, seminars, tutorials and private study. And you write using a word processor when completing important course-work assignments, project reports and theses. You score marks for all your written work, both indirectly if you make good notes when studying and directly if you communicate your thoughts effectively in assessed course-work, tests and examinations.

2 Students Must Write

Table 1.1 Judged by your writing

Characteristics of your writing	Impression created
<i>(a) Desirable</i>	<i>Favourable</i>
Clearly expressed	Clear thinking
Spelling correct	Well educated
Punctuation and grammar good	Competent
Well presented	Well organised
Helpful	Considerate
<i>(b) Undesirable</i>	<i>Unfavourable</i>
Badly expressed	Inconsiderate
Spelling poor	Lazy
Punctuation and grammar poor	Careless
Badly presented	Incompetent
Handwriting illegible	Inconsiderate

It is mainly by the quality of your writing that assessors find out what you know and how much you understand, and judge the quality of your thinking. In any assessed written work, if two students were otherwise equal in ability and intelligence you would expect the one who was the better able to convey thoughts effectively in writing to score the higher marks. So it is important to recognise, from the start of your course, that your final grades will depend not only on your knowledge and understanding of your subject but also on how well you are able to convey this knowledge and understanding in writing.

All learning depends on the understanding and effective use of language; and the purpose of all education should be to help students develop the ability to think critically, and to express their thoughts effectively whether speaking or writing. They should also be encouraged to read critically – thinking about what they read – because reading, supported by observation and conversation, is the key to knowledge. There is nothing new in these assertions.

For example, the report of a government committee of inquiry into the teaching of English in England (Newbolt, 1921) emphasised: (a) that all children must be taught to speak well before they can learn to write well; (b) that English, as the instrument of thought for English-speaking people, provides the basis for teaching all subjects; (c) that every teacher, teaching in English, is a teacher of English [because we learn by example, as well as by specific instruction]; (d) that education should be ‘guidance in the acquiring of experience’; and (e) that the appreciation of English literature

is important not only for the pleasure to be derived from reading but also as 'the lasting communication of experience' and as a good influence on the reader's own use of the language.

These thoughts were summarised by George Sampson, a member of the Newbolt committee, and 25 years later by Dorothy L. Sayers and by Eric Partridge.

English . . . includes and transcends all subjects. It is for English people the whole means of expression, the attainment of which makes them articulate and intelligible human beings, able to inherit the past, to possess the present and to confront the future. It is English in this sense that we must teach our children all day long, at all stages of their school life.

. . . every teacher is a teacher of English because every teacher is a teacher in English.

English for the English, George Sampson (1925)

Modern education concentrates on teaching subjects, leaving the method of thinking, arguing and expressing one's conclusions to be picked up by the [scholars as they go along . . . Teachers] are doing for their pupils the work which the pupils themselves ought to do. For the sole true end of education is simply this: to teach [people] how to learn for themselves; and whatever instruction fails to do this is effort spent in vain.

The Lost Tools of Learning, Dorothy L. Sayers (1948)

If only teachers [of all subjects] would teach their pupils to think out every problem, and insist that all questions be answered thoughtfully and clearly, this salutary and indeed indispensable discipline and exercise of the mind would immensely improve the pupil's speech and writing, not merely in the English class but also in every other, both at school and outside.

English: A Course for Human Beings, Eric Partridge (1949)

A further 25 years later the need to teach English Language across the curriculum was also the main point made in the report of another government inquiry into the teaching of English (Bullock, 1975); and its relevance to the study of all academic subjects was further emphasised in the 1980s in examiners' reports on the written work of 18-year-old students.

4 Students Must Write

English language and literature

Some students wrote with charm and intelligence, displaying a love of books and of scholarship. Their work, written in clear, direct and simple English, was a delight to read. Others with limited practice in essay, précis, summary and comprehension techniques were easily identified. And there were also candidates who displayed in their writing a contempt for our language.

Most candidates should spend more time thinking about the meaning of the question and the words used, and should plan their work. They would then be able to write a considered answer. With such thought, the standard of answers would be raised.

English law

Many candidates took no notice of the actual question set. Instead they wrote *all that they knew* about the subject and thus not only wasted valuable time but also demonstrated that they did not have a proper understanding of the subject.

Too many candidates fail to appreciate that a lawyer cannot function without a command of accurate punctuation and grammar. Bad English means bad law.

Engineering science

Particular attention is drawn to the deplorable English of some candidates . . . poor sentence construction . . . lack of lucidity . . . dreadful spelling. This is a pity because in both higher education and industry great importance is attached to comprehension and communication skills.

History

The best scripts revealed an excellent knowledge and understanding of the topic discussed; and an ability to write an organized, fluent and cogent answer.

Time spent on teaching the art of writing is not time wasted. Even weaker candidates obtain higher marks after they have been properly taught to plan their answers and then to write concisely, intelligibly and in an orderly manner.

Everyone is capable of self-improvement. Good candidates can do better. Inevitably, clever candidates do not do as well as they should if they have not been properly trained in examination techniques.

Geography

The best candidates showed skill and perception when interpreting questions and writing appropriate answers. But some students with a great fund of knowledge do not achieve their full potential because they are unable to make intelligent use of their material. If they are to score high marks, students must learn how to answer the different types of questions they encounter in examinations and they must acquire sound skills in composition and in basic examination techniques.

Unfortunately, there are many candidates who fail to benefit from their knowledge of geography because mistakes in grammar and spelling render them incapable of expressing themselves unambiguously.

Even the most able 18-year-olds, who sit scholarship examinations, do not write as well as they should. Consider, for example, the following comments from an examiner's report on a scholarship paper in biology.

All answers included much irrelevant information.

Looseness of expression indicated lack of careful thought.

Very few answers were comprehensive.

Even when they knew the answer many candidates had difficulty in bringing facts together in an effective order.

Many candidates had the knowledge but were unable to express themselves.

The best English is to be expected from students of English literature but, in their report on a paper on critical appreciation, examiners noted that standards of punctuation and spelling, as well of grammar, are declining. 'Even quite good candidates spell words as though they have never seen them before, varying their spelling from one occasion to the next. This decline in literacy, now *very* marked, should be a matter of great concern.'

Examiners' findings that even clever school-leavers have difficulty with spelling, punctuation and grammar, and in selecting, arranging and expressing their thoughts, are one source of concern about the way English is taught in schools. Another is the complaints of employers about the poor communication skills of students leaving schools, colleges and universities, who in their places of work write e-mails, letters, memoranda, instructions and reports expressed in English that is incomprehensible, or in which the misuse of words and of emphasis result in misunderstandings, costly mistakes and accidents.

Yet another government report on the teaching of English Language in British schools (Kingman, 1988) addressed these concerns and, like the

earlier reports (Newbolt, 1921 and Bullock, 1975), recommended changes in teacher training and in English teaching, in an attempt to ensure: (a) that *all teachers have some explicit knowledge of the facts and uses of the English language and are able to help* their pupils to develop the ability to write clearly and accurately in standard English, and (b) that their pupils are familiar with such terms as pronoun, verb, sentence, full stop, comma and paragraph, can understand their meaning, and can use this understanding both when they or their teachers talk about the language and when they need to recognise and correct faults in their own work (Kingman, 1988).

Whereas in the 1920s employers were complaining about deficiencies in use of English by 14-year-old school-leavers (Newbolt, 1921), in the 1970s and 1990s they were complaining of the poor English of 16- to 18-year-old school-leavers (Bullock, 1975; Kingman, 1988), and of those aged 21, or more, leaving colleges and universities (Dearing, 1997; Mullen, 1997). Dearing found 'no consensus among employers as to the main deficiencies [in key skills] of people entering employment, from higher education', but about a quarter complained of inadequate communication skills.

Regrettably, after more than 12 years at school, many students starting courses in higher education are clever enough to understand their work and yet unable to communicate their knowledge, understanding and ideas effectively. They need help in developing their communications skills (Wojtas, 1981). Many need help with their writing more than they need further instruction in their chosen subjects.

So teachers of all subjects, in further and higher education as well as in schools, should play their part in helping their students improve their use of words. Students are unlikely to appreciate how important writing is, in studying their subjects, and in any career based on their studies, if it is only the teachers of English at school and the tutors responsible for courses in communication skills in further and higher education establishments who encourage them to improve their use of English.

Could you improve your writing?

In view of the importance of writing in studying all subjects, and when applying for employment, and afterwards whenever they need to express their thoughts clearly and persuasively in writing, all students should be intent on improving their written work.

Those who are unable to express themselves clearly when they leave school do not suddenly acquire this ability, without effort, when they go on to college or university. If they are to improve their basic writing skills they will have to practise writing themselves, and will continue to need encouragement, constructive criticism and advice.

What is perhaps not so obvious is that those students who write well should also be trying, with encouragement and advice, to improve their writing and so to score even higher marks in their assessed coursework and in examinations.

All teachers in schools and in higher education should help all their students to develop the ability to think – and to express thoughts clearly and convincingly – so that their writing is interesting, persuasive, and a pleasure to read.

Some key skills

All students need to develop certain skills which, because they provide a basis for success in studying any subject, are called core skills or study skills. Because they are needed for success in all professions, as well as in studying all subjects, these personal skills are also called common skills, enterprise skills, key skills or transferable skills (see Table 1.2).

Your style of writing reflects your whole personality, and improving your ability to express yourself clearly and convincingly in speaking and writing is part of your continuing personal development. Therefore, before considering why students must write (chapter 2) and how students should write (chapter 3), consider three other life skills needed as a basis for effective study and for success in any career: self management, money management and time management.

Self management

Think of study as employment. Ask yourself why you are devoting several years of your life (if you are studying full-time) or so much of what might otherwise be devoted to leisure activities (if you are studying part-time) to your studies. What would you like to achieve?

To give direction to your studies, it is a good idea to list your long-term objectives (for example, to progress on your course of study and achieve grades that are a true reflection of your ability, and to progress in a particular career). Then decide how you will organise other aspects of your life, not just your studies, to help you achieve these objectives.

Table 1.2 Some skills needed in studying any subject and in any profession

<i>Personal skills</i>	<i>Why some students under-achieve</i>
1 Self management	Not working hard enough or effort poorly directed. Overwork. Personal problems. Problems with relationships.
2 Money management	Worries about money.
3 Time management	Lack of planning: ineffective use of time for study, recreation and rest.
4 Summarising	Inability to distinguish important points from the supporting detail. Not making good notes in organised classes and in private study.
5 Finding information	Not making good use of libraries and other sources of ideas and information.
6 Processing information	Not bringing together relevant information and ideas from lectures, tutorials, seminars, practical work, background reading and other sources.
7 Problem solving	Not thinking things through to a satisfactory conclusion.
8 Thinking and creativity	Mindless repetition of other people's thoughts: unwillingness to consider new approaches or different points of view.
9 Communicating	Not expressing thoughts clearly, concisely and convincingly when speaking and writing.

- 1 As the essential basis for good health, so that you keep fit for study and can enjoy life, ensure that you have a balanced diet, with enough but not too much to eat and drink each day.
- 2 Take exercise, appropriate to your age, both to provide a change from studying and to help you concentrate when you resume your studies. When you walk or swim, for example, the muscles of your arms and legs contract repeatedly, you breathe more frequently and more deeply than when you are inactive, and your heart beats faster – increasing the flow of blood through all parts of your body. This is why, after exercise, you are alert, have a feeling of well-being, and are refreshed.
- 3 Ensure that you have enough sleep, so that you wake feeling refreshed and are always alert when you need to concentrate. Most adults need about eight hours' sleep each night – and if they go late to bed are not at their best mentally or physically on the next day.

Money management

Financial planning is important, from the start of a full-time course, so that you can try to live within your means. If as a full-time student you also

work part-time to increase your income, this will leave you less time for other things that should be part of student life or for private study – and so may make it more difficult for you to achieve your long-term objectives. Financial planning is also important for a part-time student, even with an income from full-time paid employment, because extra expenses are likely to result from course fees, and from the cost of travel, books and equipment that might not otherwise have been necessary.

Time management

Organising your studies, to promote effective learning and to avoid stress, is largely a matter of allocating your time and then concentrating on essentials.

As a student some of the time you devote to study is organised for you, as indicated in your timetable, but you must accept responsibility for your own learning. From the start of any course you need to organise the rest of your time – each week – to ensure that you devote enough time to study and enough to recreation, and that hours are not lost in procrastination. For example, look at your timetable to see when there are periods that you can use for working in the library. Most people work best in the mornings, so if you are studying full-time try to make an early start each day – whether or not you have organised classes.

At the start of your course, to help you achieve your long-term objectives, set yourself medium-term objectives by listing things you plan to achieve in each year of your course, in each term or semester, before your next vacation, and in each vacation. Decide how many hours you will devote to study each week, in the evenings and at weekends: and decide when you will take time off in each vacation.

In three hours set aside for study, some students find they make more progress if they work for about an hour on each of three tasks, with a short break between tasks, rather than for three hours at one task. However, it is not possible to make rigid rules about such things – to suit everyone or every occasion.

Set yourself short-term objectives. At the end of your last study period each day, list the things you plan to do on the next day, apart from attending organised classes. For example, you may need to read a chapter in a textbook, consult a reference book in a library, seek information from other sources or ask your tutor a question. Some of the things you have to do (some tasks) cannot be done effectively in one study session, so you will need to recognise smaller tasks within these tasks – some of which can be done, or must be done, before you do the others.

In your list of tasks, distinguish those that are urgent and important (see

1	IMPORTANT URGENT	2	IMPORTANT LESS URGENT
Do first		Do second	
<hr/>			
3	LESS IMPORTANT URGENT	4	LESS IMPORTANT LESS URGENT
Do third (today, if necessary)		Need not do today	

Figure 1.1 A guide to prioritising tasks, but always use your judgement and remember that less important does not mean unimportant

Figure 1.1) from those that should come lower in order of priority. Then: (a) number the tasks in your order of priority, (b) tick tasks off your list as you complete them, and (c) reconsider your priorities when adding new tasks to the list during the day or planning your next day’s work.