Writing academic English at master's level

PG level

In one sense the requirements of writing academic English at postgraduate level are the same as those at undergraduate level. General principles are listed in the sections below. But just as a good undergraduate degree is a criterion for acceptance to study at master's level, the marking criteria for academic work take the best of undergraduate work as a baseline. For example, while an awareness of a range of perspectives on any issue would be part of the criteria for a 1st class mark at undergraduate level, this awareness will be automatically required of a master's student. A broad view A good grasp of the technical aspects of your subject area will be taken for granted, but students at master's level will be expected to develop quickly an awareness of how technical matters fit into a broader context. This could be framed, for example, in terms of PESTEL analysis: awareness of Political, Economic, Social, (broader) Technological, Ethical and Legal factors.

Equally important, a professional and authoritative tone will be expected in the use of Language, such as would be seen in industry reports created for management purposes. Documents which do not command attention are unlikely to be rewarded with much attention in the outside world; academic tutors will mark the work with this in mind.

A, B, C and D

A technical report (academic document) is a formal report designed to convey technical information in a clear and easily accessible format. Principles A, B, C and D apply: writing should be Accurate, as Brief as possible and Clear; these three things are different and there are trade-offs between them. D stands for Diagrams, or other non-text items such as flow charts, tables, images and so on. These are often very good ways of summarising information either instead of or alongside text. Long, dense sections of text are not reader friendly and inserting other content is a good way to break up text on a page.

Structure and process

A practical structure and a clear contents page are both essential, being helpful both to the reader and to the writer during the writing process. Summaries or abstracts of sections are very useful - not everyone will want to read the whole of every section. Plan before you write, build up from small to large elements and aim to edit as you go along. Start from bullet points, headings or a mind map, and build up to sentences, paragraphs and sections. This should be a cyclical process: think, research, plan, write, edit and repeat same. Save and back up your work regularly in several places and insert citations/references as you work. This will save time and avoid plagiarism issues.

Use only a few direct quotations as appropriate, and when paraphrasing aim to create new sentences, not to substitute words and phrases into existing sentences. Use online tools or editing software with caution if at all. Documents are often written from the middle outwards; it is hard to write an introduction or conclusion until the substantial parts have been created.

Tone and language

The tone should be formal and neither longwinded nor chatty; the report is not a conversation. Avoid using 'I', 'you' or 'we', since a report will typically be about things rather than people. This is often achieved by using the passive voice, e.g. 'the equipment was first calibrated'.

Passive forms can however be awkward sometimes, and this can be remedied by using forms like 'the measurement process necessitated that…. ' or 'the user requirements stipulated that…'. Long or technical words are only better than shorter ones if they fit with A, B or C above. However, some short words such as 'do/did' and 'get/got' are unattractive on the page and should not normally be used. Aim to write simple, short sentences. Obviously, some sentences will be longer than others, but beyond more than two or three lines they can become confusing, especially if they are about technical subjects. Simple sentence forms tend to be clearer, especially for describing causes and effects or sets of relations, as is often the case in writing about engineering, technology, business or information technology. Moderate, cautious adjectives and adverbs should be used to make meanings clearer, not to add colour; the aim is to convey information not to entertain.

Putting a case forward in academic writing is not the same as making a sales pitch. Punctuation can help to make meanings clearer too, but most of the time commas and full stops are enough. Academic writing should answer questions rather than ask them, therefore question marks and exclamation marks are rarely used. Poor writing or errors of punctuation or language are distractions from the content and make the writer appear amateurish.

Reflection before submission

At every stage of your writing bear in mind the assignment brief, marking criteria and what the learning outcomes require you to show through your writing. Good writing is a mixture of well researched and paraphrased source material, a few quotations and, very importantly at master's level, some thoughts of your own. As we have said it is better to perform editing and include citations as you go along, but in the final stages before submission, it is often still desirable to improve, move and remove. Reconsideration often generates better ways to express ideas, an insight that certain information would be better included in a different place or perhaps the conclusion that something does not belong at all. Do not be unduly preoccupied with the word count since quality matters more than quantity. A really well written document may well be shorter than a mediocre one. On the next page are some notes on common mistakes in academic writing and some links to webpages about Harvard referencing.

Harvard referencing

Swiss School of Business FResearch advises the use of the Harvard format for in text citations and reference lists.

There are links about this below to various public access online resources.

[SSBR Harvard Referencing Guide](#)

Common mistakes in academic writing

Long, rambling sentences which are difficult to follow. Lack of (or confusing) structure and layout. Informal language (the internet of things is going to have a massive effect on people's lives). Longwindedness or including irrelevant detail (the paperclip was first invented in….) Missing out articles (a, an or the). Missing out other small words (to, of, by etc.). Incorrect prepositions in phrases or with phrasal verbs. No main verb in a sentence. Confusing similar words such as complement and compliment, affect or effect (spellcheckers usually miss these errors). Poor paraphrasing, sometimes leading to issues of plagiarism.