



Academic Writing Centre ENGLISH LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT

Top 10 Writing Tips for University Students

1. **Start early** – Writing a university-caliber paper is not a quick and simple task. You will need to devote a sufficient amount of time to each of the following stages of the writing process: prewriting, researching, outlining, drafting, and revising & editing.
2. **Read your professor's assignment guidelines** – Make sure you fully understand *what* it is you are being asked to write about. Analyze key instruction words (*discuss, compare, defend...*). Identify your audience. Consider your purpose in writing. In short, seek clarification from your professor if you are unsure how to proceed.
3. **Narrow the scope of your topic** – In order to produce a unified and coherent paper, it is necessary to locate your subject matter within clearly defined parameters. It is next to impossible to address some vast, profoundly complex theme in the space of 5-10 pages; doing so will likely result in an overly generalized, superficial, and tangential piece of writing. Finding a specific focus for your argument will also make the research process easier.
4. **Draw upon a variety of sources when conducting research** – Consult with professors and other experts in the field, read scholarly books and academic journal articles, investigate government documents, dig through archive materials, comb library databases – don't just Google your topic and then settle on the first few web sites that pop up.
5. **Try not to write to a 'formula'** – While the 5-paragraph essay has its uses, it is an ultimately arbitrary and artificial construct, and as a writing paradigm, one that hardly lends itself to the more advanced research papers required of university students. Of course, ideas need to be logically developed and articulated within a larger, overarching context; however, by slavishly adhering to a template – that is, any predetermined pattern of organization - the writer is allowing *form* to shape *content*, and in the process, stifling his or her creativity.
6. **Apply principles of critical thinking** – As daunting as this concept may be, it can be understood in fairly straightforward terms: to analyze and synthesize data; to present and then evaluate evidence in support of a position; and to examine and test possible solutions. Above all, it is the ability to argue clearly, logically, and persuasively. Bear in mind that your professors are interested in what *you* have to say about your subject – not how comprehensively you can rehash the ideas of others (hint: don't overquote).
7. **Use a writing style appropriate for academic discourse** – Although an 'academic' writing style should not be interpreted to mean language that is lofty or convoluted, you must resist the temptation to write as you speak. Make every effort to avoid the following: clichés, contractions, slang or other colloquial expressions, abbreviations, excessive jargon, humorous asides, and the 2nd person 'you' voice. It should also be noted that conventions regarding academic style may differ according to discipline e.g. liberal arts versus technical or social science faculties.
8. **Cite your sources** – While you do not need to cite either your own thoughts or information that would be considered common knowledge, it is imperative that you provide a source for any quoted material or paraphrased ideas. Failure to attribute sources is considered plagiarism and could result in a grade of zero and possibly even suspension from university.
9. **Revise, edit, and proofread your work** – No matter how thorough your research, how persuasive your argument, or how eloquent your style, a paper riddled with spelling mistakes, typos and other format anomalies will compromise your credibility as a writer. An hour or two of careful proofreading could mean the difference between an 'A' and a 'B' paper.
10. **Go to the Academic Writing Centre for help** – Whether you are a first year English major or a PHD student in engineering, we can offer the writing assistance that best suits your needs, including daily drop-in advice, individualized writing assessments, weekly workshops, Peer Writer support, and writing handouts. (Writing handouts are also available on our [website](#)).