

# Learning to learn

A seminar series on the strategies behind effective learning.

# How to Write

# Why improve your writing?

Because many (most?) of your assessment tasks as a student will be written, it makes sense to ensure that you're able to communicate effectively in this format.

Clear writing suggests that you are capable of clear thinking. If you can't clearly articulate an idea when you have the time and space to write it out, there's not much hope that you can do it in the moment.

Being able to write well is a valuable skill, no matter what the specific discipline is.

# Who are you writing for?

If you think of a writing task as something imposed on you by someone else and you're completing the task for the person who assigned it, you're going to write what you think they want to hear. This is seldom going to lead to a positive outcome.

But, if you're writing because you think it can bring clarity to your thinking and you're doing it for yourself in order to improve your learning, you're likely to have better outcomes.

Spending some time reflecting on why you're writing and who you're writing for may be a useful exercise.

# What is “weak” writing?

There are many reasons why writing may be considered “weak”, but we’ll only list 3 here:

- The *curse of knowledge* is the idea that the reader knows what we know, which leads to the use of jargon, technical language, and assumptions, all of which can obscure the meaning of what we write.
- We use technical language and complicated sentences to hide the fact that *we don’t understand* what we’re writing about.
- The mistaken idea that writing in the *passive voice* is “academic” and that it conveys objectivity and smart. In practice it often sounds awkward and impersonal.

# Classic style

Classic style is a way of thinking about writing that is engaging and compelling for the reader. It may not always suit the discipline, but it's well worth considering.

Classic style at a glance:

- The writer has seen something in the world.
- She positions the reader so he can see it with his own eyes.
- The reader and writer are equals.
- The goal is to help the reader see objective reality.
- The style is conversational.

# Stages of writing

It's important to stress that writing doesn't progress linearly through these stages and that it's reasonable to move back and forth between them.

- *Pre-writing*: Deciding who the audience is, choosing a topic, gathering resources, outlining the argument.
- *Drafting*: Focus on paragraphs and not sentences, aim for 3-4 drafts, rough and clumsy is fine, don't be afraid to delete early and often.
- *Editing*: After working through the drafts a few times, focus on the sentence-level structure, spelling, grammar, etc. This is about refining the argumen, which should already be present.
- *Revision*: Get feedback from a few people before submitting, and be prepared to go back to the pre-writing stage if necessary.

# Barriers to writing

“I don’t have enough time to write”. Schedule time to write like you schedule time to attend class. We only have time to do things we plan to do.

“I need to do more research before I can start”. This is usually a strategy to procrastinate and avoid starting. Starting is the hardest part.

“I need a new [piece of equipment] so that I can be more effective”. You can write anywhere, with anything.

“I’m not inspired to write”. Inspiration is overrated. The more you write, the more you will be inspired to write.

“I have writer’s block”. If you really can’t write, you can edit. If you can’t edit, you can collect resources.

# Tips to improve your writing

Read. Read. Read. You can't be a good writer if you don't read a lot.

Aim to write one word at a time. Don't focus on the 50 000 word thesis. Focus on the next word.

Write about something you care about.

Avoid jargon and technical language.

Omit needless words. Avoid adding words to make up an arbitrary word count.

Be selective about what you include in your writing.

# Conclusion

If there's only one idea that you take away from this module, it's this: **the ability to write clearly is an indicator of your ability to think clearly.**

Reflect on who you're writing for, as well as why you're writing. The answers to these questions will inform how you approach the task.

Recognise the factors that result in weak writing. Choosing *classic style* will help to overcome some of these factors.

Recognise that writing is not linear and that a piece will improve through an iterative process.

Barriers to writing are often no more than strategies to procrastinate.

Like all the skills in this programme, writing can be improved.

# Resources

- Brockman, J. (2014). [Writing in the 21st century: A conversation with Steven Pinker](#). The Edge.
- King, S. (2000). [On writing: A memoir of the craft](#). Scribner.
- Pinker, S. (2014). [The sense of style: The thinking person's guide to writing in the 21st century](#). Penguin Books.
- Sylvia, P. (2007). [How to write a lot: A practical guide to productive academic writing](#). APA Life Tools.
- Thomas, F. (2017). [Clear and simple as the truth: Writing classic prose](#). Princeton University Press.
- Thompson, P. (2018). [the challenges of revision](#). patter blog.
- Wiens, K. (2012). [I won't hire people who use poor grammar. Here's why](#). Harvard Business Review.
- Zinsser, W. (2016). [On writing well: The classic guide to writing non-fiction](#). Harper Collins.