

Academic Writing

Certain requirements pertain to work written by students for higher education programmes. If you are a new student or perhaps returning to study after a break you may feel that you need help with developing appropriate skills for academic writing. This section is designed to help you to meet the requirements of the School in relation to academic writing. Continuous assessment is used as a method of assessment for many of the modules. As a result you will be required to submit essays or assignments throughout the year. An essay is an expression of your ideas and placing your ideas on paper generally helps you to integrate new knowledge, to challenge your assumptions, and to consolidate your learning. It is important to understand that you will probably need to write two or more drafts of your essay before you are satisfied with the final result. You might find your thinking changes as you reflect on your work.

Essay writing will improve through extensive reading and reflection on the subject matter and will get easier as your course progresses. Structure, content, logical flow and coherence of your paper are important considerations.

For guidance on academic writing:

Gimenez J. (2011) *Writing for Nursing and Midwifery Students*, 2nd ed, Palgrave Macmillan, Hampshire.

McMillan K. & Weyers J. (2010) *How to Write Essays and Assignments*. Prentice Hall, Harlow.

Neville C. (2010) *The Complete Guide to Referencing and Avoiding Plagiarism*. Open University Press, Berkshire.

Rose J. (2007) *The Mature Student's Guide to Writing*. Palgrave Macmillan, Hampshire.

SEARCHING THE LITERATURE

Most assignments involve a critical approach to some aspect of your course work. Before beginning to write you must think, plan and conduct a good search of the relevant literature. This will usually involve accessing and utilising a range of literature to find out what has been written about a particular subject. This may include textbooks, reading suggested by the module leaders or lecturers, journals and other printed matter, databases and internet sources. When you are searching for ideas for a new project you may need to scan material on a number of possible topics. This is not always an easy task and requires some time spent in the library perusing texts and articles for ideas or searching databases such as EBSCO, CINAHL, SCOPUS, PUBMED and MEDLINE. **It is only when you have done some preliminary reading that you can refine your area of enquiry and define the 'descriptors' for a library or computer search.**

While reading and searching the literature try to develop a system for recording information about the material you have consulted. This will help you locate the information again if necessary. Many students find it useful to develop a list, in alphabetical order in a book/card or computer system. The list should record all the publication details of texts/articles consulted and an indication as to why you found this interesting. Having an accurate record of your reading may save time and frustration later on when you need to use a quotation or to make a reference to a particular author. This record may also be used later for drawing up your reference list. It may be useful for you to state on your recording system where the book or journal may be located, for example, which Library (Brookfield, Boole, Hospital etc).

Internet and electronic sources of information

Using the Internet has become more common as a source of information. When citing Internet sources of information, particular care needs to be taken of information to ensure they are from a reputable source. In many cases it is not clear who is the author of the web page, which may make it difficult to evaluate the quality of the information.

Evaluating information on the Web

When you are reading/accessing web based information you may keep these points in mind

Authority

- Who is responsible for information on this page?
- What are the authors' credentials – educational background, past writings or experience in this area?
- Is the article academic or popular?

- Is the author associated with an institution or organization?
- Is contact information for the author or producer evident – a phone number, email address?

Objectivity

- Is the information provided as a public service or is it from a professional or academic source?
- Is there advertising on the page and if so, is this differentiated for the informational content?
- Is there a bias to the information provided?

Currency

- When was the page posted?
- When last was it updated?

Note: If you cite controversial/temporary sources, it is in your interest to print a copy of the web page in case you need to prove a source after it has changed/moved. This also applies to e-mails, Usenet postings etc.

A balance of material sourced from journals, electronic sources and text books should be presented.

PRESENTATION

A well-presented paper creates a good impression and there are certain requirements in relation to submission of academic work. For guidance on format for submission of title page, student declaration etc. (see Attachment 1 a-d). Page numbers must be included at the bottom of the page except on the two title pages

PLANNING

It is important to spend time planning your work before you begin. Be clear about the purpose of the paper and consider what you want to say. Try to jot down notes and ideas when they occur and see how they might relate to each other. Reflect on what you have written; discuss the topic with friends or classmates who may also have some ideas. Identify the material you feel might be relevant and start to gather the appropriate literature.

When you have read some literature, spend some time thinking about the topic. Do you need more information? Does the literature relate to your previous knowledge and experience? Is there some more material that you should consult? Do not be surprised if you find that your ideas have changed somewhat from your original topic, you may have discovered some new information which will help to develop your ideas. Begin to organize the material on the topic in a logical pattern. It may help to brainstorm; on a rough sheet jot down the ideas that you feel that the topic should include. Try to see how these may be linked together so that the paper highlights the most important themes. Write points on separate sheets of paper (or directly on a computer) shuffle these (or cut and paste) until you have created a logical flow of ideas. This creates your initial paper plan and from this you can draft a table of contents page, which will reflect how your paper will develop. In writing, each theme should be developed in turn while ensuring that the themes are integrated together logically. For longer assignments, plan to use separate chapters but even short assignments will benefit from organising themes or ideas into different sections with appropriate headings. Enumerate chapters and sections correctly. You may consult with the lecturer concerned at any stage but this is likely to be most useful to you when you have your reading complete and you have a plan for the paper prepared. At this stage you should begin to write your first draft but be prepared to edit and re-edit as you develop your ideas, see gaps in your argument and develop a basis for your discussion.

STRUCTURE

Title Page Prepare title pages (including page for declaration/ word count)

Table of Contents It is necessary to prepare a Table of Contents which may include a list of sections or chapters, appendices, diagrams and graphs as appropriate. Short assignments should include an introduction, body of text (2 – 3 concepts/ themes) and a conclusion. Initially the table of contents will be a draft but the final version should include the appropriate page numbers. This is quite easy to set up when using a word processing package.

Introduction All papers should begin with an introduction of 1-2 paragraphs (this may be longer depending on the length of the paper). The introduction should set the context and purpose of the work and describe the main elements to be addressed; if it is appropriate definitions of terms may be included. From reading the introduction the focus of the essay should be made clear to the reader. Where you are given the opportunity to select an area, then reasons for your interest in the topic may be included, particularly if it relates to an area of practice. It is always worthwhile to go back and review your introduction when the essay is complete to check that it adequately reflects the content of your work; edit if appropriate.

Identify Concepts/themes relevant to your chosen topic (main body of text) the discussion section should include an exploration and review of the relevant literature, particularly highlighting any recent developments. Different areas for discussion should be placed under different headings. Your ideas should be presented in sequence with points following logically. Use paragraphs to improve the clarity of your work and each paragraph should be used to develop or explore a single theme. Try to have a logical flow to the material and clear interlinking of themes and ideas throughout. Avoid simple description (though some will be required) and endeavour to incorporate some critical analysis into your work. If you have been asked to 'discuss' a topic then you must present alternative viewpoints, which should be supported by the literature. Use references to the articles, books and electronic sources, you have consulted to support your balanced arguments and avoid anecdotal comments.

Any statements you make in the essay which draw on other people's ideas or information should be supported by a reference to the article, book or electronic source from which the idea or information came.

If the ideas are your own, you do not need to reference them. When you draw on your own experience in your writing be careful about producing anecdotal evidence in support of your arguments.

When using a quotation, comment on its relevance to your argument and reference correctly.

Minimum use of quotation, appropriately referenced, is acceptable.

A good essay will utilise evidence to support arguments discussed (Gimenez, 2011). This involves taking a critical and discursive approach to research and frequently linking various pieces of research to illustrate or support your argument. Where appropriate, essays should relate to your own area of practice and experience however be careful about producing anecdotal evidence in support of your argument. You should try to interpret and analyse the literature and relate it to clinical practice.

Any statements you make should be supported by referencing the article, book or electronic source which gave you that information. Sometimes it may be difficult to choose as to the prevailing perspective on a concept/ theme but select an argument that you agree with and defend your choice. You should select literature that supports your argument and also recognise alternative view/s. This is particularly important where you are making strong or controversial statements.

Summary This should help to link sections together. If you have long sections in your paper it is a good idea to give short summaries at the end of each section.

Conclusion This should terminate your paper. For short assignments this should be brief (1-2 paragraphs). New literature should **never** be introduced in a conclusion or summary. If it is relevant to your argument this literature should be incorporated into the body of your text.

Summaries and conclusions are used to reiterate the main points presented or discussed in the text and to close the paper. It may include recommendations for practice and recommendations for further research (if relevant). A good introduction and conclusion demonstrate a good understanding of the topic being explored.

Note: Always carefully proof read your final draft and check your references before submission. It may help to ask a colleague to also read your work. It is essential to check your paper for spelling, grammatical errors and referencing etc.; Tipex/correction fluid should not be used.

Objective terms are generally preferred in academic writing. This is particularly appropriate when referring to the work of other authors. However, the School encourages you to use the personal pronoun 'I' or 'my' where relevant i.e. when it is your own opinion or where it is a reflective assignment or reflecting on your own practice experiences:

On my unit

Or

I suggest that aspects of Watson's theory of caring are problematic because . . .

Objective terms are preferred for more formal writing:

This review includes several studies on caring in nursing

Or

The following section will consider ways in which Watson's theory relates to practice . . .

Both approaches may be used in the one assignment.

Using literature to support written work

When using literature to support written work ensure that this is done correctly and appropriately referenced. Acceptable methods include using direct quotations, referring generally to what someone else has written or paraphrasing appropriately. Paraphrasing involves using someone else's ideas but putting these into your own words. This is acceptable in academic writing. **Where just a few words are changed in a sentence or paragraph this is considered to be plagiarism.**

In all of these situations you must acknowledge the source of the literature by using the appropriate reference.

Points to remember when writing:

1. Ensure that the title of your paper refers to and reflects the material presented.
2. List the points to be made if the topic is to be adequately covered and when the essay is in draft form identify the themes presented in the different paragraphs.
3. Write clearly, simply and legibly. All academic disciplines including nursing and midwifery have their own language.
4. Use a word processor and retain at least one or two copies of your work on USB key, list essays on the USB key so that you may get another copy or use part of the material again to develop the theme further.
5. Choose correct words and spell correctly (check dictionary or thesaurus). Avoid or define any words that might be ambiguous.
6. Do not plagiarise (see notes below on plagiarism).
7. Make sure your English is grammatically correct. Do not use slang and avoid clichés or 'flowery' language.
8. Do not use secondary references as primary sources.
9. All sentences must be complete and linked in a paragraph. Use paragraphs to improve the clarity of your work and check paragraphs for content and irrelevant sentences or words. Each paragraph should address one key point.
10. Be concise, check each sentence and edit as appropriate.
11. Ensure that the facts presented are correct and current and whenever possible make use of recent research findings.
12. Do not underline points or use italics.
13. Be consistent and accurate in the use of punctuation, full stops and capitalisation
14. When using abbreviations write the complete word the first time you use it with the abbreviation thereafter e.g. World Health Organisation (WHO). On every other occasion you may use the abbreviated version of the word i.e. WHO.
15. Arrange the points you wish to make in logical order - keep to the point.
16. If you are making an argument explain each stage clearly.
17. Give exact references and quote correctly, enclose direct quotations in quotation marks with the page number from which the quotation is taken.
18. Avoid generalisations unless you support the generalisation with adequate evidence.
19. Label diagrams, tables or graphs carefully giving each an appropriate title. Introduce each table with a sentence or two and comment on the content of the table after it is presented.
20. Be aware of your own prejudices and ensure that the argument you make is well balanced
21. It is unacceptable to overuse quotations. Comment on quotation when used. Quotations must be short.