

Bill Kirton

brilliant

Essay

What you need to
know and how to
do it



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essay



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Bill Kirton



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About the author

Before taking early retirement to become a full-time writer, **Bill Kirton** was a lecturer in French at the University of Aberdeen. He has also been a Royal Literary Fund Writing Fellow at the RGU in Aberdeen, and the universities of Dundee and St Andrews. His radio plays have been broadcast by the BBC and on the Australian BC. His crime novels and a historical novel have been published in the UK and USA and his short stories have appeared in several anthologies. He lives in Aberdeen with his wife, Carolyn.

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Author's acknowledgements

I owe a lot to the students I've worked with over the years. I hope I taught them some things; I know they taught me many. So let me acknowledge at the start my appreciation of the interesting and stimulating discussions I shared with them. More specifically in the context of this volume, I'd like to thank Steve Cook and others at the Royal Literary Fund who initiated and ran the imaginative scheme which funded Writing Fellowships in universities throughout the UK. It was through that scheme that I met Kathleen McMillan and Jonathan Weyers, who became friends as well as colleagues. My thanks to them for their expertise, knowledge, experience and friendship.

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Introduction: do as we say, not as we do

To explain why we chose that heading for the introduction, let's start with a question. What's wrong with these sentences (all of which you'll find in this book)?

- 1 Finally, two examples illustrating a common error.
- 2 But the more familiar you become with your subjects and the issues being covered in your course, the faster you'll be able to read.
- 3 It'll help you to understand what's being conveyed.
- 4 ... a word that links adjective clauses to the noun they're referring to.
- 5 ... something to base your thinking and writing on.

The main answer is that they all break rules (of grammar, punctuation and style) which we'll be saying must *never* be broken. (As does that sentence, too, because we're not 'saying' anything, we're 'writing' it.) More specifically: 1 isn't a sentence because there's no verb in it; 2 begins with a conjunction, i.e. a word which should join two parts of a sentence, not start it; 3 uses contractions ('It'll' and 'what's'); and 4 and 5 both end with a preposition.

Another question – this time about the whole problem of political correctness and gender-specific language. When we give examples involving a student or lecturer, do we say he or she? Or do we stay correct and use the either/or form, writing

sentences such as ‘The student must ensure that he or she conducts his or her research in a style that suits himself or herself? We hope the answer to that one is self-evident.

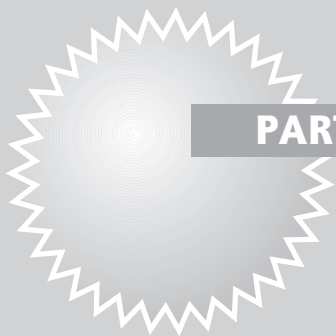
We’re starting with these questions to warn you against copying the style of this book in your academic writing; it breaks many of the rules which you’ll need to respect. The reason for that is that our aim here isn’t to be academic or formal; we want our style to be personal, conversational, direct and easy to read. So we don’t mind starting paragraphs with ‘OK’, or sentences with ‘And’ or ‘But’. We’ll be using the sort of contractions familiar in everyday speech, such as ‘you’ll’, ‘we’ve’ and ‘don’t’. We don’t want the writing to be sloppy or to give you examples of ‘bad’ English but nor do we want to be constrained by the formality of conventional academic style.

So that’s why we’ve used the ‘incorrect’ formulae in the sentences we quoted. And the way we’ll overcome the gender-specific issue is by using ‘he’ or ‘she’ at random. Students and lecturers alike will sometimes be male, sometimes female. There’ll be no attempt to make sure there’s a 50-50 split to guarantee political correctness either. Our intention throughout isn’t to be ‘correct’ but to communicate.

The book is organised into six parts. The first part focuses on the importance of writing, the things markers are looking for and how to get started. Part 2 is about planning your research and the importance of critical thinking, while Part 3 deals with writing your first draft. In Part 4 we look at the various aspects of writing techniques, including grammar, punctuation, vocabulary and structure. Part 5 moves on to editing, revision, plagiarism and referencing; and the final part stresses the importance of presentation, suggests ways to improve your marks and considers the special challenges of exam essays.

You'll find that some points, such as those concerning referencing and plagiarism, the need to stay objective, and the importance of using evidence to support your arguments, are repeated quite frequently. We've done this deliberately whenever we feel something needs to be stressed or re-stressed.

If, when you've read the book, it's helped you to feel more confident about things, we've achieved our goal. University is a great foundation for your future and the various aspects of it, including the writing you do there, will help you to develop and demonstrate your abilities as well as find out more about yourself in the process.



PART 1

Establishing the basics



CHAPTER 1

Developing good writing skills

Some students experience a sinking feeling at the prospect of having to write an essay or assignment. Others see it as a challenge. Our intention in this book is to eliminate the first response and highlight the second to help you approach such tasks with more confidence and a better understanding of the purpose they serve. On the surface, that purpose seems simple – you’re being asked to organise and communicate your knowledge and understanding of a particular topic. But the process of gathering material, then shaping it into an argument will help to improve your language and communication skills and develop critical thinking techniques that you’ll keep on using long after you’ve graduated.

The importance of writing effectively

It must be obvious that, if you can generate ideas and communicate them well on paper, you have a talent that you’ll be able to apply in all sorts of contexts, well beyond your student days. So, while writing may seem to be just a regular university chore, in fact it’s one of the most important skills you’ll take away with you when you leave. Attitudes to it vary but, whether you consider yourself competent or have doubts about your abilities, the need to produce assignments will help you to learn and refine your own writing into an effective communication tool.

Identifying the basics

Let's start by spelling out the bare bones of the writing process.

First, you need something to write about. The essay question will indicate an area of interest and perhaps some specific aspects of it, so your job will be to look through information on that topic and choose relevant material.

Next, depending on what you've been asked to do, the material has to be sorted, organised and structured into an outline of your argument.

Once you've done that, you have to expand the outline into a flowing, coherent text. And to do so, you need to be able to 'play' with language. You obviously need to get your grammar, punctuation and spelling right, but you also need to choose and group your words into sentences and paragraphs that offer the best possible presentation of your material.

The final task is to read your essay carefully, correct any errors and improve it where it doesn't seem quite right.

The aim of all that is to group your ideas logically, show that you can use language flexibly to convey your thoughts clearly and, equally importantly, keep the reader's attention and interest.



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Sometimes, writing seems difficult because you're trying to write and work out the logic of an argument at the same time. It's much easier if you know where you're going. So, before you start, plan the structure of the whole text. That way, you'll always know where you are and you can focus on structuring individual sentences and paragraphs.

'Playing' with language

By 'playing' with language we mean being prepared to move things around and try out different word arrangements. People are often surprised at how writing can be changed and improved simply by rearranging the order of words or phrases.

Heads and tails

If you experiment by shifting elements around in a sentence, you can sometimes make it clearer and much more powerful. Moving a phrase or clause from the tail end to the beginning or vice versa often alters the emphasis and gives prominence to the aspect that needs to be stressed. Consider this statement:

The medical profession spent time and energy on activities in which they had little expertise because they were faced with the need to deliver a complete range of services with a greater attention to cost control as a result of the administration's directive.

It's too long, it just adds one bit of information after another and it leaves a muddled impression. The reader has little idea of which of the various elements is more important than the others. In the end, it all just tails weakly away. So let's move things about:

Faced with the need to deliver a complete range of services with a greater attention to cost control as a result of the directive, the medical profession spent time and energy on activities in which they had little expertise.

It's still too long but it's slightly better. At least now we've separated it into two distinct elements – the things that are causing the problems and the way the profession responds to them. But it's still unwieldy; the first half, for example, gives the reader no chance to pause and just keeps piling element upon element. Let's give it one more try:

The result of the directive was that the medical profession, faced with the need to deliver a complete range of services with a greater attention to cost control, spent time and energy on activities in which they had little expertise.

It's the best so far. The various elements have been brought into better relationships by starting with the directive, then wrapping its requirements inside the main point, which is the fact that the medics were doing things they knew little about. We could go on tweaking it, but we've done enough to make the point, which is to show how taking identical elements and rearranging them changes meaning and emphasis.

Long and short sentences

People often ask whether the length of sentences matters. The answer is 'that depends', but it's fairly obvious when sentences need changing because they just don't feel or sound right. Let's see how lengthening or shortening them affects their impact on the reader. We'll take what we called 'the best so far' from the examples above:

The result of the directive was that the medical profession, faced with the need to deliver a complete range of services with a greater attention to cost control, spent time and energy on activities in which they had little expertise.

It's still one long sentence. Let's split it:

The directive required a complete range of services to be delivered with a greater attention to cost control. The result was that the medical profession spent time and energy on activities in which they had little expertise.

Perhaps this does make it clearer by allowing the reader to pause between the two separate pieces of information and absorb them separately. On the other hand, the separation destroys the power of the link (and implied conflict) between the two.

And if you think a lot of shorter sentences would be easier to understand, try this:

The directive required a complete range of services to be delivered. It also insisted on greater attention being paid to cost control. The medical profession had little expertise in this. As a result, they wasted time and energy on it.

That staccato effect is as bad as, maybe even worse than the original long, rambling effort, so there's no obvious rule about long is bad, short is good. Again, though, the point is that when you've written something, come back to it later and see whether you can improve your message by moving its component parts around.



brilliant tip

There's great satisfaction in finding exactly the right combination of words to express what you want to say. That's fine when you have plenty of time to rework your draft text but it's not so easy in exams. You'll find, though, that taking that sort of care with your essays during your coursework will make sentence manipulation more instinctive and help you cope better with the pressure of time in the exam.

Writing and thinking

When you write, you're putting yourself on the page. Your manipulation of ideas, your choice of words, the fluidity of your text – all these things reflect your intellectual abilities. In other words, they demonstrate the quality of your thinking. They show that you can:

- solve problems and explain how you did so
- build and sustain arguments and counter-arguments

- understand the higher-order thinking of others, and apply it in your own work
- express opinions based on a sound analysis, synthesis and evaluation of many different sources.

Communicating

You should think of writing as performing two main functions: giving shape to your thoughts, and communicating those thoughts to others. With that in mind, it's obvious that you don't write an essay in the same way that you text a friend, nor do you write in the same way you speak. It's a question of what's called register.

Spoken language, texting, emails and messages to friends are all much more informal and relaxed than the register you need to use for academic writing. (So, incidentally, is the register we're using for this book, as we explained in the introduction.)

Using an informal register for your assignments will lose you marks for a variety of reasons.

- Informal language is limited, imprecise and often uses slang expressions which can quickly become dated and obsolete.
- It's more likely to be emotive and subjective.
- It may suggest that you're not taking the essay seriously. (On the other hand, writing convoluted sentences full of big 'impressive' words can be just as bad in terms of effective communication.)
- Thinking about your words and constructing your sentences and paragraphs to suit the understanding and ability of the person who'll be reading them is more likely to communicate ideas well. It'll probably get you better marks, too.

**brilliant tip**

Very few people can produce a fluent, error-free text at the first go. There's usually something that could be improved. Being self-critical is part of the writing process but you could also ask a 'study buddy', friend or member of your family to read your work critically and say whether it makes sense to them. They may pick out faulty logic, gaps, awkward passages or other things that don't seem right to them, even if they aren't exactly sure what the problem is.

Strategies for improving your writing

The obvious advice is practise, practise, practise, and the need to hand in regular pieces of work will make that easier. But writing calls for different skills – observation, listening, reading critically, and so on. Here are some tips to help you increase your awareness of what's needed.

Be sensitive to different registers

Essays and professional reports are formal documents. Have a careful, detailed look at your writing to make sure that your language and structures are well suited to the more formal style and vocabulary expected at university.

Learn to recognise the styles in your subject area

People often assume that different disciplines use different styles. Well, it's obviously true that the content of essays or articles will be different but there'll be few stylistic variations. Academic writing in all the disciplines uses good, clear, unambiguous standard English. Clear writing doesn't necessarily need long words, long sentences and long paragraphs. So look

at how the experts in your field write and analyse their books and articles to see how they make their points and what makes their writing powerful and expressive.

Find out what register your target profession uses

Part of what you'll do at university will be preparation for writing in your professional life when you graduate. You'll find that different firms and organisations have their own 'house style' and, if you join them, you'll need to adapt to it. The same is true of the different professions. You can check this by looking at publications such as in-house journals, reports or printed publicity.

Try consciously to expand your vocabulary

You'll need to have a good command of the specialist terminology, or jargon, used in your specific field, but that's only part of what we mean. If you want to express ideas with clarity, force, subtlety and confidence, you'll need a wide vocabulary. If you have only a limited number of words at your disposal, your ability to express subtleties and nuances will be severely restricted. The more you read, the more words you'll acquire.

Find out what markers expect

As well as absorbing these apparently abstract comments about thinking, communicating, subtlety and so on, there are other, more fundamental things you can do. Markers expect clear thinking, good structure and the rest, but they also appreciate grammatically correct English, with words spelt properly and good punctuation. These are all aspects of good presentation so it's worth spending time learning about them and becoming more confident in how you use them. A little effort in these areas can have a noticeable effect on your grades.

What next?

Look at some of your recent work ...

... and compare it with exercises you wrote some time ago. Ask yourself if it's evolving as your studies progress, identify any changes and think about what you can do to make it more expressive and effective.

Learn more about language ...

... by writing for your university students' newspaper or joining a creative writing class. They'll both help you to see how flexible language can be and how it works in different genres. As well as helping you to develop as a writer, it'll give you constructive feedback from other more experienced writers.

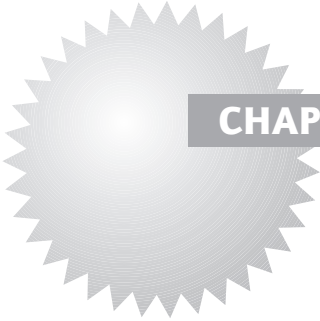
Think about the type of writing ...

... you'll do in your chosen job. Look at job adverts in professional journals or national newspapers and notice how often they ask for 'good communication skills'. If you can confidently tell potential employers that you have the writing skills they need and show them evidence to prove it, you'll obviously improve your chances of an interview.



brilliant recap

- Good writing helps to generate and communicate ideas.
- Choose and structure your content to increase its impact and accessibility.
- Demonstrate the quality of your thinking in your writing.
- Choose your words and style to suit the audience.
- Writing calls for different skills: observation, listening, reading critically, and practice, practice, practice.



CHAPTER 2

Giving markers what they want

