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Writing a Research Paper

‘A research paper may seem like a heavy burden to you in the beginning, but it can actually be an exciting project. It is an opportunity for you to learn about a topic you are interested in and to share the result of your research with others’ (Galko, 2001: 125)

Introduction

Writing a research paper effectively is a proof of ability to demonstrate that you can read, analyse, synthesize, connect and report information in your own words. Being able to express yourself clearly, concisely and persuasively is an essential skill that most learners should try to develop. Students as writers are generally judged by the quality of their writing. Similarly, research papers are usually graded on how well they display the following conditions (.Covington, 2011: 2)

- ‘- Define a clear topic and stick to it throughout the paper, addressing a consistently defined audience.
- Use the best available sources of information and acknowledge them appropriately.
- Display careful organization and clear wording.
- Follow scholarly standards for formats, grammar, spelling, and other mechanical matters.’

This paper aims at reporting some writing skills as suggested by (Wallwork, 2011)

Part One: Writing Skills

‘The writing of an accurate, understandable paper is just as important as the research itself.’
Robert A Day, *How to Write and Publish a Scientific Paper*

1– Planning and Preparation

- ‘ Download the guidelines for authors – these will tell you about the style and structure of your paper

- Choose frequently cited papers in the journal to see how other authors construct their argumentation, and note down ways in which your research is different and innovative with respect to theirs
- Choose one paper as a model onto which to map your research, imitating the style and organization. This model should be written by a native English speaker
- Note down useful / standard phrases from your model paper which you can then use in your own paper
- Decide on the best order to write the various sections of your paper. It is generally best to start with a very rough draft of the Abstract, and then whichever section is clearest in your head (generally the Materials and Methods)
- Consider having separate documents for each section. This enables you to work on several sections at the same time
- Make sure your unique contribution to your community is very clear in every section, not just in the Abstract
- Write in a way that even a non-expert can understand
- Write directly in English, and use every opportunity for improving your writing skills
- Use online resources' (17)

2 – Word Order

- 'Basic English word order is: (1) subject, (2) verb, (3) direct object, (4) indirect object. Keep these four elements in this order and as close to each other as possible.
- If you have a choice of subjects, choose the one that is the most relevant and leads to the shortest construction.
- Avoid delaying the subject. So do not begin a sentence with the impersonal it.
- Avoid inserting parenthetical information between the subject and the verb.
- Most adverbs are located just before the main verb and before the second auxiliary verb when there are two auxiliaries.
- If possible, delay adverbs until later in the sentence. The main exceptions to this rule are adverbs of contrast and those that enumerate points.
- Put adjectives before the noun they describe, or use a relative clause. Do not insert an adjective between two nouns or before the wrong noun.
- Do not indiscriminately put nouns in a string.
- Avoid ambiguous word order.' (32)

3 – Breaking up Long Sentences

'To be easy to digest, sentences must be reasonably short and not too complex. The reasons for this are not grammatical: they are connected with the number of items of information the reader can absorb in a single unit or 'thought'.'

John Kirkman, writing expert, author of *"Good Style - Writing for Science and Technology"*

You do not lose any of the complexity of your thought by dividing up a long sentence into shorter ones. The information contained is exactly the same. All you have done is to present that information in a way that is easy for the reader to absorb at first reading.

- 'Do not separate the subject from its verb using more than 8–10 words.
- Avoid adding extra information to the end of the main clause, if the main clause is already about 15–20 words long.
- Check to make sure that a sentence has a maximum of 30 words, and do not use more than three or four 30-word sentences in the whole paper.
- Consider beginning a new sentence if the original sentence is long and contains one or more of the following (or equivalents): and, which, a link word, the - ing form and in order to.
- Maximize the use of periods (.). Use the minimum number of commas (,), avoid semicolons (;) and parentheses.
- Do not worry about repeating key words. If dividing up a long sentence into shorter sentences means that you have to repeat key words, this is not a problem.' (51)

In fact this repetition will increase the clarity of your writing

4 – Structuring Paragraphs and Sentences

'It's far more difficult to be simple than complicated.'

John Ruskin, English art critic and social thinker

- 'Always think about your readers – order the information you give them in the most logical way and in the simplest form.
- Begin each paragraph with a topic sentence, then use the rest of the paragraph to develop this topic. If appropriate have a short concluding sentence at the end of the paragraph.
- Decide whether to begin a new section with a short summary, or whether to go directly to the main points.
- Put the topic as the subject of the paragraph or sentence, then give known information (context, background) followed by new information. Consider not giving the known information if it will be obvious for your readers.

- Move from the general to the increasingly specific, do not mix the two.
- Always progress in the most logical and consistent order, do not go backwards and forwards.
- Do not force readers to change their perspective: put negations and qualifying phrases at or near the beginning of a sentence.
- Break up long paragraphs and begin a new paragraph when you talk about your study and your key findings.
- Avoid redundancy in the final paragraph of a section.' (72)

5 – Being Concise and Removing Redundancy

'The ability to simplify means to eliminate the unnecessary so that the necessary can speak.'

Hans Hoffman, German-born American abstract expressionist painter

You can be more concise by:

- deleting any words that are not 100% necessary.
- finding ways of expressing the same concept with fewer words.
- using verbs rather than nouns.
- choosing the shortest words and expressions.
- avoiding impersonal phrases that begin *it is ...* (87)

A frequent result of reducing the overall number of words is that the subject of the sentence tends to be shifted closer to the beginning of the sentence. This means that the reader gets a much quicker picture of the topic of the sentence. Also, if you use the minimum number of words the importance of what you are saying will stand out more clearly for the reader.

6 – Avoiding Ambiguity and Vagueness

'I have revised several hundred research papers in the course of my career as a language consultant. Ambiguity as a cause for misunderstanding by readers is often underestimated by non-native researchers. This is often because they mentally translate what is a clear and precise sentence in the syntax of their own language into a potentially ambiguous sentence in English.'

Chris Powell, Director of International House, Pisa, Italy

Your writing will be much clearer if you take into account the following:

- *which* is used for adding information about the preceding noun, that defines the preceding noun.

- *which, that* and *who* should only refer to the noun immediately preceding them.
- the *-ing* form (gerund) has no subject. Make sure it is clear what the subject of the *-ing* form is.
- clarify whether something is a consequence of doing something or a means to do something by using *thus* (consequence) and *by* (means) before the *-ing* form.
- use the definite article (*the*) before a noun only if you refer to a specific example of that noun. If you are giving a generic idea, do not use the article.
- learn the most frequent uncountable nouns and false friends in your field .
- be very careful when you use pronouns (*this, that, them, it* etc.) – make sure it is clear what they refer to and don't be afraid of repeating the same word many times (if this will improve clarity).
- avoid using *the former ... the latter*, simply repeat the related noun.
- if necessary specify exact locations, when using *above* and *below*.
- use *respectively* when it is not 100% clear how items are related to each other.
- be careful of punctuation with *which* and *and* – punctuation must help the reader understand the relationships between the various parts of the sentence .
- never use synonyms for key words, only for generic verbs and adjectives .
- use the most precise word possible .' (107)

7 – Paraphrasing and Plagiarism

'Plagiarism is unacceptable under any circumstances but, despite this universal disapproval, it is one of the more common faults with student papers. In some cases, it is a case of downright dishonesty brought upon by laziness, but more often it is lack of experience as how to properly use material taken from another source. ...Plagiarism in professional work may result in dismissal from an academic position, being barred from publishing in a particular journal or from receiving funds from a particular granting agency, or even a lawsuit and criminal prosecution.'

Dr. Ronald K. Gratz, Associate Professor
in the Department of Biological Sciences, Michigan Technological University
(USA), author of "Using Another's Words and Ideas"

- Plagiarism is a serious issue in international science. If you commit plagiarism your credibility and reputation will be seriously compromised.

- Copying phrases from other people’s work is perfectly acceptable and is a good way to learn useful phrases in English that you can then use in your own work.
However, such phrases must be 100% generic in the sense that they hold absolutely no hard information
- Use direct quotations sparingly. The problem is that the referee (or your professor) cannot be sure that you have fully understood the quotation
- Typical ways to paraphrase:
 - use of synonyms for non key words (especially verbs, adverbs and adjectives)
 - change of part of speech, for example: from noun to verb, from noun to adjective, from one category of noun to another category of noun (e.g. science to scientist).
 - change of nouns and pronouns from singular to plural and vice versa
 - change of verb form, for example: from –ing form to infinitive, from simple to continuous, from active to passive
 - change of style from personal to impersonal
 - reversal of the order in which information is presented
- Never paraphrase technical words
- If the original contains ideas that in some sense ‘belonged’ to the original author, then this author should be acknowledged. This is true even if you have radically changed the original so that it is now unrecognizable
- When quoting the work of a ‘third’ author, cite the reference to that third author’s paper’ (159)

References

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