



IMPROVE YOUR WRITING SKILLS – Part 1

Letters, Assignments, Essays and Presentations

As a means of communication, writing has a distinct advantage over the spoken word. Like the TV chef's dish that had been "prepared earlier" it can be as near-perfect as possible, all the mistakes having been remedied before it is given a public airing. With care and consideration, the written word can convey exactly what the writer intends. Unfortunately, if time is the enemy, a hasty scribble can do as much damage as engaging one's mouth when the brain isn't in gear. Whether writing letters, either business or personal, school and college assignments, essays, reports, short stories, or full-length novels; even posting online chat and tweets, a little extra thought will make the finished product so much better and less ambiguous. Hopefully, the following advice may help make writing less of a challenge and more enjoyable.

WRITING - LETTERS

Personal:

Always assuming you know the person you are writing to, style and content will be pretty much the same as if you are having a chat. Those you only contact once in a while should be interested in the latest news; but imagine how much better it would be if it was entertaining as well as informative. All this takes is a bit of time for some thoughtful editing before sending it.

Formal:

The format of business-type letters changes over the years, so compare some recent letters and emails that have been received. Note the positioning of your address, that of the sender, where the date goes and how it is typed, plus how the main message is set out. Also see the way it begins – Dear Sir, Dear John, Valued Customer; then how it ends – Yours faithfully, kindest regards, etc; and notice that a business-like opening is not closed with familiar words (eg Dear Sir... ..Catch you later) – that's a no-no! Formal is formal; casual is casual – beware of mixing up the two. The accepted forms of communication are best observed. Avoid starting the letter: "I am writing to you..." Isn't that obvious? The content should be to the point and as brief as possible. If sending a hardcopy letter, try to position the main body of text in the centre of the page with sufficient space at the bottom for a signature.

Letters of Complaint:

Whether justified or not, insults are unlikely to achieve what you wish. Be firm, certainly, and say it how you see it; but beware of going overboard, particularly with comments that might be deemed libellous. If at all possible, leave it a day before sending, especially if your emotions were high when writing it. Reading it again in the cold light of day, you could decide it is a bit strong and in need of modification.

WRITING – ASSIGNMENTS

Instructions/Guidelines

These tell you what is required - obvious, yeah? Apparently not: too many students get carried away with the project and what they are saying in it, but haven't fully understood what is expected. Always read the guidelines before starting and don't miss the key points. Plan your approach and structure, and while writing, frequently refer back to the instructions to ensure you are not going off track. Take particular note of any suggested format, font, margins, line-spacing, etc. Ignoring these criteria won't help your grading.

Who Are You Writing For?

If you don't know the lecturer personally, structure the assignment simply and concisely, giving as much as necessary to answer the requirements, but avoid padding and smart comments.

This is especially important in exams when a complete stranger will be assessing your work. Even when you know the lecturer who will be marking your assignment, your job is to impress them with the correct information and in a writing style that is acceptable.

Subject Matter:

If you have a choice, pick the one about which you know the most, or a topic that you feel you can research without difficulty. Should the project require you to argue a particular side or position, put the case for the opposition first followed by your own opinion, which is the one you want them to remember. Open with a short outline of what you are about to present, and conclude with a brief summary of the key points.

Basic Structure:

In your opening statement, unless specified that you must, never repeat the question verbatim. Use your own words to outline what you are about to present in the body of the text, plus state (or hint at) the conclusion that you will be steering towards. Try to finish a paragraph with information or a phrase that leads into the next paragraph. This will make the work fluid and easier to read. Keep in mind how you intend to conclude and build your argument/essay/opinion bit by bit, each addition moving inevitably towards the closing statement.

Length and Content:

Quite often the length will be set. Writing 1,000 words on a subject of which you know little can be challenging; conversely, when the issue in question is a passion, the limitation of a mere 1,000 words may prove disappointing. What you cannot afford to do is produce tedious lists of similar examples just to pad the text; nor should you be too opinionated by waging a personal crusade. Keep it concise and very much to the point. Before wading in, formulate a simple plan. Unless otherwise specified, use the 3-act-play structure. Decide on 3 key points that explain and support your position, then research references and quotations if they are required. Use these to build your position – keypoint one stating the issue, the argument for and against, and the possible consequences. Number two should present pertinent information on the subject, how the matter has developed over time and should include evidence to support your position versus the opposition. This middle act will be the longest, taking up perhaps half or more of the word count. The last keypoint will be the main one that wraps up your position and proves it beyond any doubt.

Checking Your Work:

Always give yourself sufficient time to read, re-read and edit your work before submission. Use a program spell check, but never trust it to be perfect; and be aware of the default dictionary - English (US), English (UK), etc. If possible, make a **draft** printout (hardcopy) and read it away from your normal work area. Quite often you will pick up mistakes that you missed on screen.

Presentation:

Stick to the guidelines, but always try to make the work look appealing so that whoever is going to read it will want to do so simply because it is a refreshing change from all the other submissions of students who can't be bothered. Beware of going over the top - flashy cover pages won't impress a lecturer who is only interested in the content.

For a look at some more informative articles on a variety of subjects just click on the navigation bar



Where every effort has been made to be accurate and fair-minded, comments and opinions expressed on this website are based on personal experience and do not necessarily reflect the views of the wider community or those groups and institutions mentioned. A Season of Happiness and its staff accept no responsibility for any outcome based on suggestions offered. What works for us may not work for you. Please bear this in mind.