

Academic writing skills *

Introduction

In your studies in business and economics disciplines, you will do substantial amounts of writing in assignment work. Writing is a significant part of assessment requirements and develops your ability to communicate clearly and appropriately in a range of settings. These are important skills that meet the university and faculty's learning aims, and are needed for the workplace. Your unit outlines often provide specific information about unit writing requirements.

As expressed above, writing is an important part of your studies because it:

- provides your tutors/lecturers with a view of your learning;
- develops your written communication skills, which are also very important for the workplace.

In your writing, you must demonstrate your ability to integrate ideas and information and critical and analytical thinking about the topic or issue. This means much more than just retelling or describing information. Integrating ideas and information means understanding that there are a range of views on issues and topics, and being able to reconcile these as you form your own response to a topic, issue or task. Being analytical means that you 'pull apart' the topic, and the information that you read on it, rather than accepting it on 'face value'. Critical thinking means that you evaluate, or judge the value of, material or data on the topic, for the purposes of your assignment task. You do this from the perspective of the material or data's contribution to your perspective on the issue.

4.1 Characteristics of successful writing

Successful academic writing communicates your message clearly to your examiner. The following questions will help you to understand what constitutes a successful assignment response. Ask yourself the following questions about your assignment writing:

- Does it answer the question/respond to the task?
- Is it clearly structured?
- Does it express *your* perspective on the task and is it structured around this?
- Does it provide supportive evidence for your perspective with references and/or data?
- Does it 'hang together' well and present your perspective consistently and logically?
- Is it expressed clearly in sentences and paragraphs?

In the following sections of this chapter, we investigate each of the above requirements.

4.1.1 Responding to the task

You must address the assignment question; that is, you need to get to the heart of the task. This provides a direction for your research and development of a relevant response. This

requires you to analyse your task carefully so that you are clear on what is being required. A 'quick read' to pick up the theme is not enough. It will not reveal to you the complexities and subtleties embedded in the task.

In responding to your assignment tasks, you are expected to read, understand, interpret, integrate and apply information. This means understanding the 'how' and 'why' of issues and topics. Writing that only explains the main themes and does not relate them in the way required by the task will not get good marks. Your ability to do this is based on an analytical understanding of the task.

Study the following tasks from Management, and Accounting and Finance. Follow the steps we have used in analysing them.

4.1.1.1 Assignment task, Management

The impact of the external environment on a manager's actions and behaviours cannot be over-emphasised. However, there are forces in the internal environment that continue to play a major role in shaping managers' endeavours. Use the interaction between some of the factors in both environments to explain how business organisations and managers are facing the challenges of the new global environment. Support your answer with examples.

4.1.1.2 Do an initial analysis of the task

An initial analysis will indicate to you that the task above has two major sections. This is seen in our analysis below. The Context is the setting. The Directions in the next section of the task tell you what you must do.

CONTEXT

The impact of the external environment on a manager's actions and behaviours cannot be over-emphasised. However, there are forces in the internal environment that continue to play a major role in shaping managers' endeavours.

DIRECTIONS

Use the interaction between some of the factors in both environments to explain how business organisations and managers are facing the challenges of the new global environment. Support your answer with examples.

4.1.1.3 Identify the key terms and directions

You need to identify the key terms, to which you will apply the directions. In our sample task, the key terms are underlined and in bold, and the *directions are italicised and in bold*.

It is vital that you take note of the direction words and phrases. You must do what these ask.

The impact of the **external environment** on a **manager's actions and behaviours** cannot be over-emphasised. However, there are forces in the **internal environment** that continue to play a major role in shaping managers' endeavours. *Use* the **interaction** between some of the factors in both environments to **explain** how business organisations and managers are facing the challenges of the **new global environment**. *Support your answer with examples.*

4.1.1.4 Summarise the task

You can see that key concepts in our task above are:

- the **interaction** of **external** and **internal environment** factors;
- **how** they **impact** on what a **manager does**.

Descriptive writing would merely explain what external and internal environmental factors are in the global business environment. It would not discuss how the external environment factors *interact* with the internal, and how they affect a manager's role.

In sum, this task is asking:

- How do external and internal environment factors interact in the global environment?
- How do these impact on organisations?
- How do aspects from the external environment shape what a manager does in the internal environment of the organisation?
- Give examples.

You should try to form a succinct summary of your task as we have done above. This directs you to the type of information you require and provides you with key terms for your library search.

4.2 Exam question, Accounting and Finance

Outline the shortcomings of financial reporting as established in Statement of Accounting Concepts (SAC) 2. Explain how SAC3 overcomes these shortcomings.

4.2.1 Initial analysis, key terms and directions

Your analysis of this task should indicate the following:

Outline the **shortcomings** of the Statement of Accounting Concepts (**SAC**) **2**.
Explain how **SAC3** ***addresses these shortcomings***.

The words in bold italics are the *direction words*.

The **underlined words and phrases** are the key terms.

From this analysis, you can see that there are two processes that need to be undertaken:

- ***Outline***: provide an overview of
- ***Explain***: give detailed explanation of

This question is asking you the following:

- What are the financial reporting objectives in SAC 2? What were the criticisms of SAC 2?
- Based on SAC 3, how should report information be presented?

You must answer both sections of this task. If you only answer one (for example, what the reporting objectives of SAC 2 are), you can only get a maximum of half the marks for the questions.

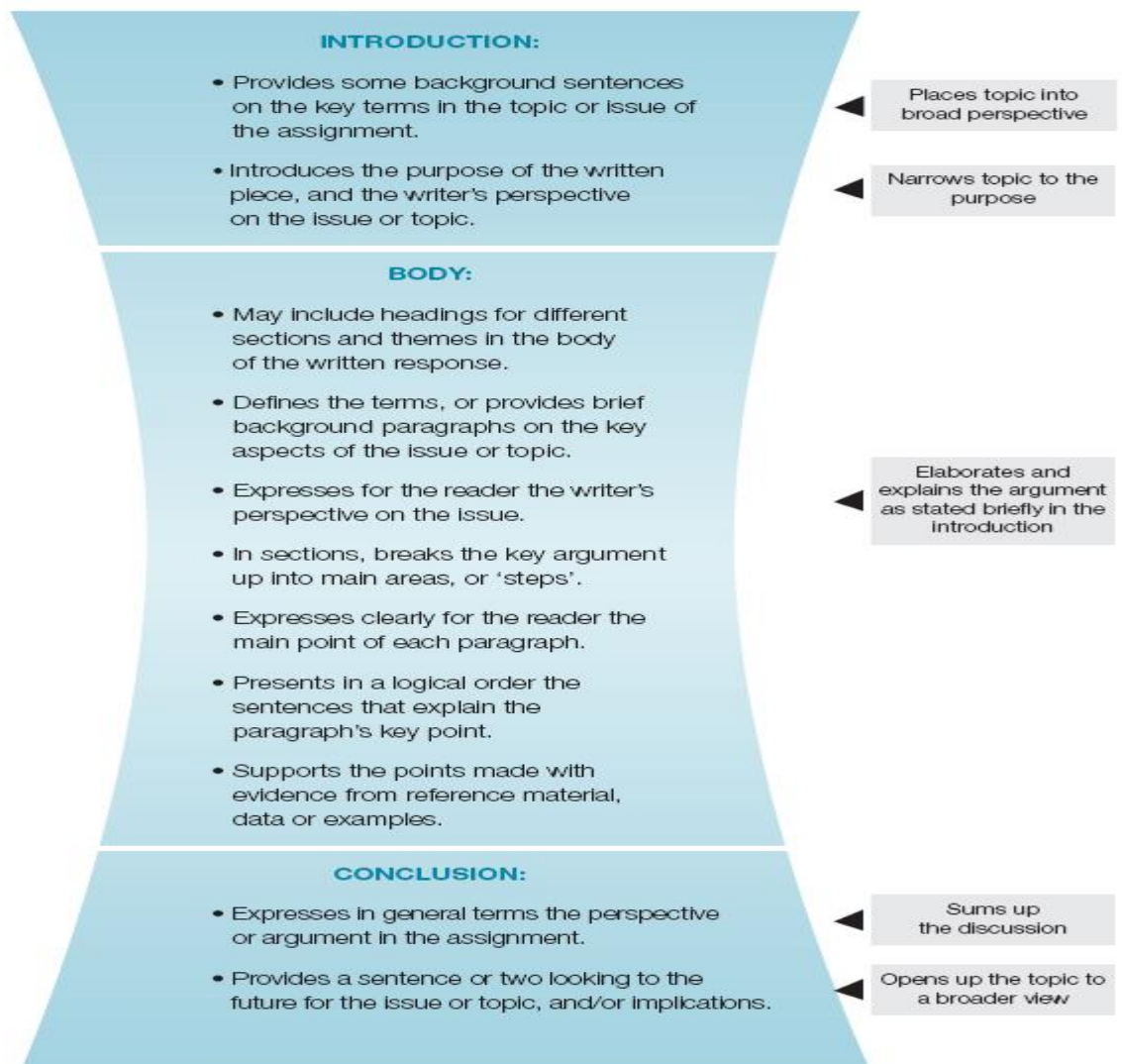
4.3 Structuring your writing clearly

You need to communicate your response clearly to your reader. Clear organisation of your ideas will facilitate this.

In general terms, many forms of communication are structured along the following lines. While there are differences in some structural aspects of an essay, a report, a response to a case study or a thesis, generally speaking, the following basic structure applies to all.

- **Introduction**
- **Body**
- **Conclusion**

4.3.1 Writing structure

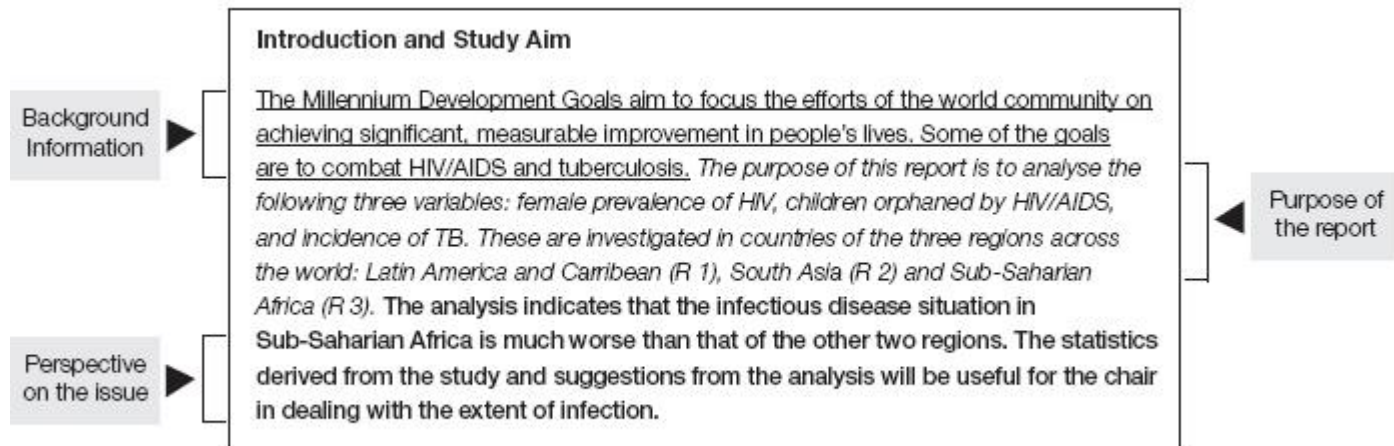


4.3.1.1 Structure of an introduction

Study the Introduction below from a report for the unit, Econometrics and Business Statistics. Note how the ideas are organised and compare this with the suggestions for an introduction that we have provided above.

The Introduction:

- begins with background sentences on the topic (underlined)
- explains the purpose of the report (*italics*)
- presents the student's perspective on the issue, derived from an analysis of the data which is presented in the body of the report (**bold**).



4.4 Forming and expressing your perspective on the task

You develop your own perspective on your assignment's topic or issue through reading, integrating and thinking about other views in the literature, or from analysing your data. To do this, keep your task in mind as you are reading, taking notes or interpreting data. At the back of your mind, ask yourself what the information means for your task. That is, how does it shape your viewpoint on the topic or issue?

When you have completed your reading, note-taking, analysis and thinking on the topic, try to form your own response or perspective. This is like a succinct, 'nut-shelled' answer to the problem embedded in the task, expressed in a sentence or two, or a few dot points. It provides a focus for your further planning and writing.

Regarding our Management essay task discussed earlier, your succinct response may be something like the following:

4.4.1 "Crystallised" response

- In the global environment, organisations need to ... so that ... This means that external environment factors such as ... are important because ... These interact with internal environment factors such as ... Therefore, managers, as the ... of organisations, need to ... so that...

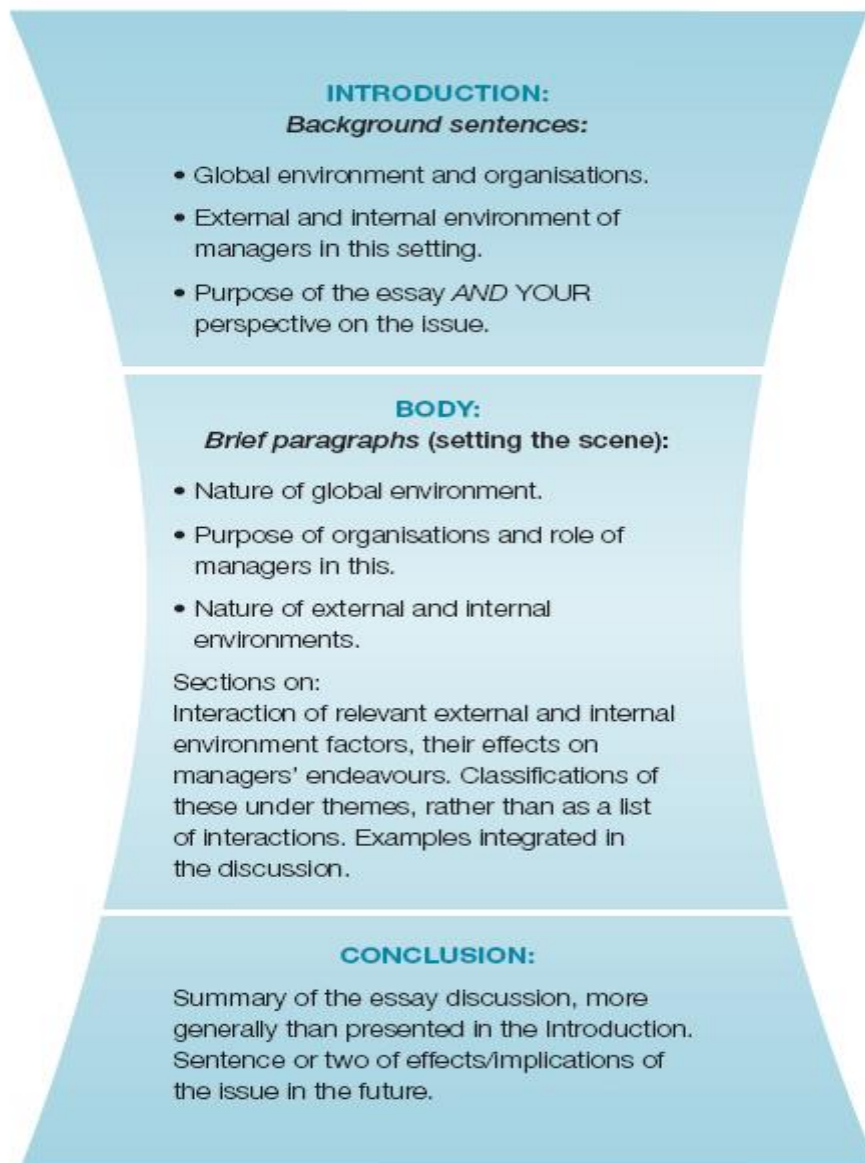
In the Introduction for the Econometrics and Business Statistics assignment above, the writer's perspective on the issue is:

- The infectious disease situation in Sub-Saharan Africa is much worse than that of the other two regions.

When you have refined your response, you can place it in the lower part of your Introduction, as seen in the Introduction for the Econometrics and Business Statistics report above.

4.4.2 Plan the response

Study the following plan for the Management essay. Note how the major part of the body of the essay discusses the interaction of external and internal environmental factors and the manager's role. There are only brief paragraphs on the general themes of the essay. Rather than merely describing the environments, the essay is responding to the complexity embedded in the task, which is the interaction of the internal and external environments in a manager's role.



4.5 Supporting your perspective

Your perspective on the issue or topic should run through and shape your writing. A brief summary of your perspective in the introduction functions like a 'road map' for your reader. Study again the Introduction for the Econometrics and Business Statistics report that we have presented previously. Note how the student's perspective on the issue is summarised in the Introduction.

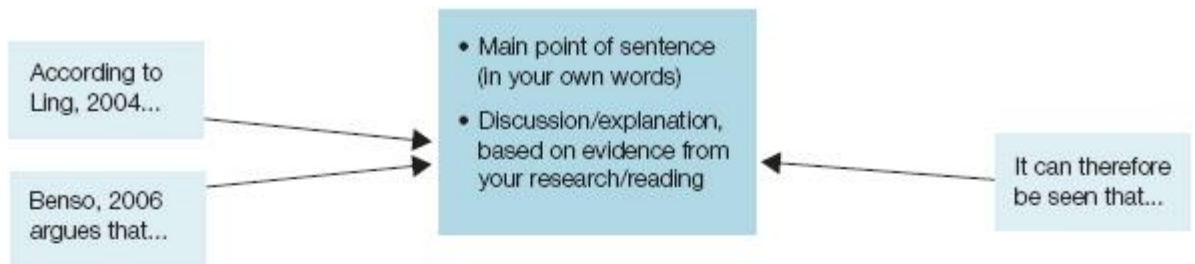
The infectious disease situation in Sub-Saharan Africa is much worse than that of the other two regions.

The body of the report then continues to explain the writer's perspective in detail. Themes are developed for the major stages in the argument (or perspective), and points are established within these themes. If you are using headings, the themes form the headings. The points are the focus of your paragraphs. Evidence from the reading or data is used to support the points made.

4.5.1 Paragraph structure

Generally speaking, a paragraph is structured along the lines of a main point or topic sentence, followed by further discussion and explanation of the main point. The literature or data is brought in by the writer as evidence for the main point.

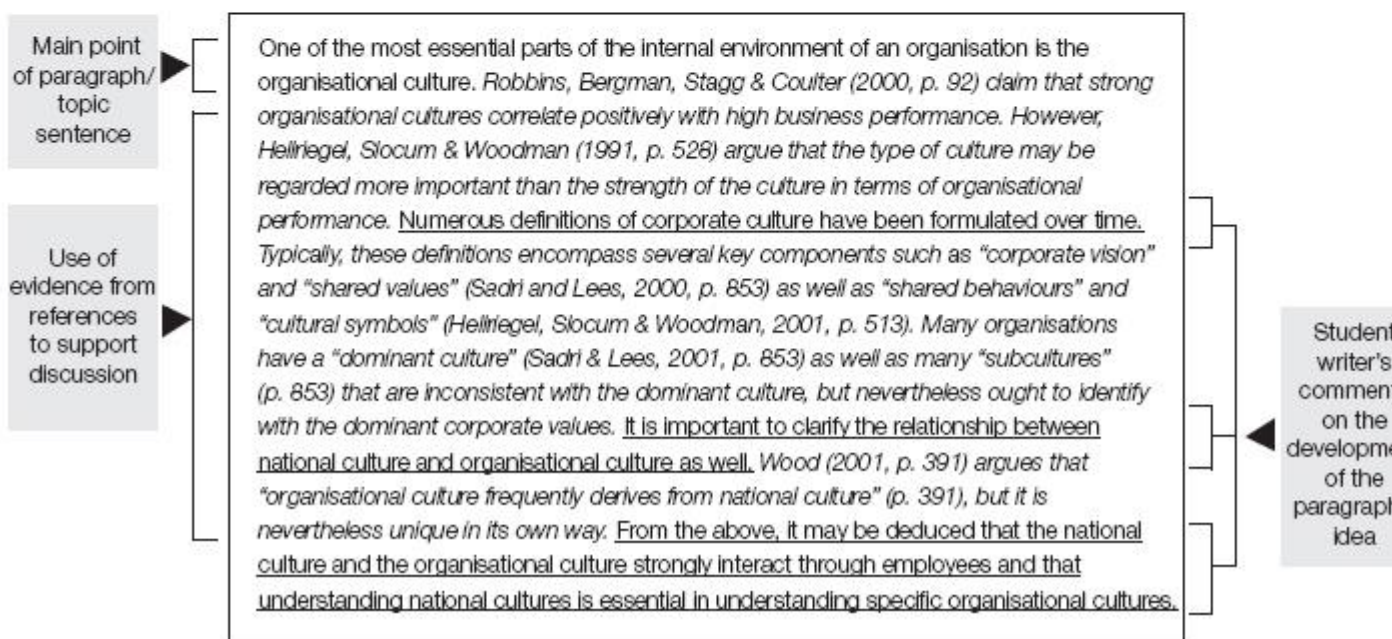
Writing the essay: paragraph structure



A less successful paragraph does not have a main point. It merely cobbles together evidence from the literature or data, but does not explain explicitly to the reader the overall significance of the evidence. There is no writer comment or perspective. A less successful use of references can be seen in the paragraph below.

Example 1.

Study the paragraphs below from an essay for Management. Note how the reference material supports, or is evidence for, the paragraph's main point. Note how the student's discussion runs through the paragraph.



In summary in the above paragraph:

- The writer's voice, or comments run(s) through the paragraph above.
- The writer has expressed a perspective at the beginning of the paragraph.
- The writer comments on the references and their contribution to the discussion. This is an indication of critical and analytical thinking.

4.5.1.1 Referencing

References are used as evidence to support your point of view in a paragraph. If you take ideas or phrases and sentences from a text, you must reference the source. This principle applies even if you express the ideas in your own words. Failure to do so is plagiarism, and is

a serious offence in the university. See Chapter 9 in this Guide for a fuller explanation of plagiarism. In the examples below, note how the author of the information cited is given prominence, followed by the writer's summary of the view in their own words.

Robbins, Bergman, Stagg and Coulter (2000, p. 92) claim that strong organisational cultures correlate positively with high business performance.

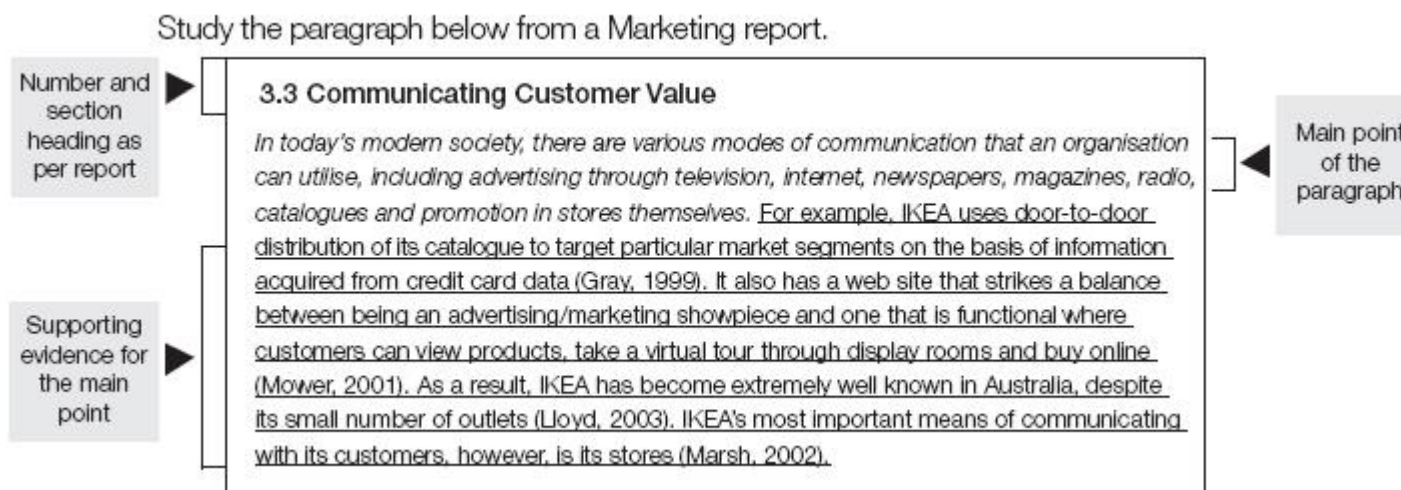
However, Hellriegel, Slocum and Woodman (1991, p. 528) argue that the type of culture may be regarded more important than the strength of the culture in terms of organisational performance.

There are a range of ways that writers can integrate references in their writing, and we explain some of these below.

4.5.2 Use of references

Example 2.

Study the paragraph below from a Marketing report.



4.5.2.1 Referencing

Note the way the references are used in the following paragraph. Note how the writer has summarised in their own words the information from the references. The information itself is given prominence in this type of referencing, as indicated by the sources of the references being placed after the information.

- For example, IKEA uses door-to-door distribution of its catalogue to target particular market segments on the basis of information acquired from credit card data (Gray 1999).
- It also has a web site that strikes a balance between being an advertising/marketing showpiece and one that is functional where customers can view products, take a virtual tour through display rooms and buy online (Mower 2001).

- As a result, IKEA has become extremely well known in Australia, despite its small number of outlets (Lloyd 2003).
- IKEA's most important means of communicating with its customers, however, is its stores (Marsh 2002).

4.6 Presenting a consistent and logical response

It is important that your response to your assignment task 'hangs together well', and that your reader can follow the perspective you are presenting. As we have discussed previously, to assist this, it is important to integrate ideas and views from others to form your perspective and present it to your reader in the Introduction.

Over the assignment, your ideas need to be organised logically. For instance, your ideas can begin from a general perspective and move to that of a more specific view.

An important part of your writing, that will help your reader follow and understand your ideas, is the use of signaling or sign-posts, and connective words and phrases. Signaling explains briefly to the reader the direction and purpose of pieces of information. For instance, signaling or sign-posting may include statements such as:

- Before discussing ..., it is necessary to define the terms.
- Following the explanation above of the nature of... and its effects on ... , discussion can now focus on ...

Connective words and phrases can help your reader to understand your thinking that underpins your writing. For instance, you may introduce a contrasting idea to one previously expressed with "however". "Therefore" or "thus" indicate results, or conclusions, while "furthermore" indicates a development of an idea expressed previously.

4.7 Expressing your ideas clearly

You must consider your reader in your academic writing. Your reader needs to judge the value of your knowledge and logic, so you need to express clearly your thought processes and ideas. To assist this, you can:

- order your ideas sequentially;
- express these ideas as clearly as possible.

If you have problems with English expression, Monash University Library provides services and resources to assist you.

Clear expression of your ideas will help your reader understand your perspective. Do not think that your writing at university must use very complex sentence structure with very sophisticated vocabulary. Students who try to write in this way often find that their reader has no idea what they are trying to say.

Try to have one main point for each paragraph. This point should be expressed clearly at the beginning of the paragraph. The rest of the paragraph should be providing evidence for the main point and explaining the idea more fully.

The following may help you to write clearly and in the appropriate academic style.

4.7.1 Formal academic language

The writing style (or register) in university studies is formal, rather than informal. While you may use colloquial or idiomatic expressions in your casual speech, this is not appropriate in assignment writing.

Study the examples below of informal and formal register.

<p><i>Do not use pronouns "I", "you", "we" in your writing. Academic writing is impersonal rather than personal in tone</i></p>	<p>Informal Around <u>you</u>, you can see lots of kinds of communication of businesses, <u>eg.</u>, <u>ads on TV</u>, internet, <u>newspapers</u>, radio, catalogues and <u>promos</u> in shops.</p>	<p>Formal In today's modern society, there are various modes of communication that an organisation can utilise, including advertising through television, internet, <u>newspapers</u>, magazines, radio, catalogues and promotion in stores themselves.</p>
<p><i>Do not use abbreviations or contractions such as "don't" or "it's" in academic writing.</i></p>	<p>The organisational culture would have to be the top bit of the internal environment of an organisation.</p>	<p>One of the most essential parts of the internal environment of an organisation is the organisational culture.</p>
<p><i>Spoken colloquial English is not suitable</i></p>	<p>be the top bit</p>	
<p><i>Precise terms should be used. This example is vague and too informal.</i></p>		

4.7.2 Some other features of academic language

4.7.2.1 Objective rather than personal

The tone of your writing should be objective. This means that you rarely use first person pronouns, such as "I" and "we". For instance:

Personalised expression	Objective expression
<p>I found that there were several views in the literature on the topic.</p> <p>I think that ...</p>	<p>Several views on the topic are postulated in the literature.</p> <p>It seems that ...</p> <p>Evidence suggests that ...</p> <p>The situation appears to be that ...</p>

4.7.2.2 Verb tenses and references

You should try to be consistent in your use of verb tenses when referring to views from the literature. If you choose to use the past tense (for example, *Smith (1998) stated that ...*), the past tense should be continued throughout the assignment. The same applies if you choose to use the present tense (for example, *Ling (2004) explores the nature of...*)

Past tense should be used in explaining facets such as the purpose of a study, or the findings: *This study has investigated...* (present perfect tense), *It was found that ...*

4.7.2.3 Passive and active sentence constructions

While you should use a combination of active and passive sentence structures in your writing, do not overuse the passive construction. It can lead to blandness in your writing. Note the difference between active and passive sentence structures below:

Passive sentence construction	Active sentence construction
The financial process was controlled by the accountant.	The accountant took control of the financial process.

4.7.2.4 Proof reading and English grammar

It is important to understand that writing is a process. Once you have completed a rough draft, you need to check that your ideas are clearly expressed, and that your writing ‘makes sense’. You can check this by having someone read over your piece of work pointing out areas and sentences where your ideas are unclear. You can also read it aloud onto a tape, when you are listening to it you can often pick up mistakes, such as incomplete sentences. Ensure you correct these in your final draft, that your Word dictionary is set to English (Australia), and that you *spell check* the final document!

In particular, this means making sure that:

- Any sentences where meaning is unclear are clarified;
- Any repetition or incorrect spelling is eliminated;
- Any poor or sloppy expression or syntax is improved.

4.7.2.5 Referencing in your writing

In your note-taking, make sure that you keep note of the bibliographic details of the source for inclusion in your assignment. These also need to be included in your reference list, see Chapter 10 for more details.

Direct quotes may be used in your writing, but should be limited in frequency. Your examiners want to read your interpretation of, and comment on, a literature view.

4.8 Checklist for academic writing skills

- Respond to the question posed in the assignment task. Analyse your task so you respond to it, rather than what you would like the task to be.
- Read and integrate the views on the topic so as to develop your own response or perspective on the task. This forms the focus of your writing.
- Provide guidance for your examiner in your writing. This can be done with headings if suitable, simple statements of direction and purpose, and linking and signaling words and phrases.
- Make sure the main points of your paragraphs are clear. Use data or evidence from the literature to discuss, support and as evidence for these.
- Limit a sentence to a single statement of fact, or one idea. This will produce simple or compound sentences rather than complex ones, and so avoid problems of handling support clauses.
- Ensure that your sentences are properly linked.
- Make sure that the identity of the noun to which a pronoun relates is clear.
- Remember that developing good written communication skills is important for your future after graduation.
- Be aware that different settings have somewhat different expectations in terms of what is effective and competent written communication. It is important that you learn to identify and respond to the written communication expectations of different settings.
- The different disciplines in Business and Economics have different preferences for forms of written communication (i.e. essay, report, case study response) and different ways of putting ideas together, and you need to be alert to and respond to these.
- Your experience in identifying the expectations and writing effectively across the Business and Economics disciplines prepares you to write effectively in future situations, global and local, in which you may find yourself after graduation.

*Extracted from Monash University

<http://www.buseco.monash.edu.au/publications/qmanual/ch-04.html>