Introduction

When it comes to writing, academic disciplines – particularly those within the humanities and social sciences – have a good deal in common and, for the most part, they share very similar expectations of students' writing. However, despite such similarity, each discipline also tends to have its own particular set of conventions, its own way of doing things, and the fields of English language and linguistics are certainly no exception. The variation that can exist between the writing practices of different disciplines can leave students who are just starting out on course assignments or research projects uncertain about what exactly they should be doing and how. Although libraries or student services units will often produce guides to help them navigate this territory, these tend to be generic rather than discipline-specific; and while individual departments may give their students guidance on how to write within their particular discipline, such guidance is often sketchy at best, providing only a few general pointers and often leaving them with more questions than answers.

This book uncovers, for the intending or newly enrolled student, some of the particularities of writing English language and linguistics essays and research projects. In doing so, it presents discipline-specific guidance on such things as assignment questions, information sources, the nature of evidence, referencing, stylistic issues and formatting, alongside much that is more generic and applicable to other areas of academic inquiry. All examples, tasks and illustrations are English language/linguistics related and many are authentic.

The book has been written in a style which, I hope, is engaging and easily accessible to undergraduate students. In order to clarify explanations, it includes numerous examples, as well as tasks designed to help you test and consolidate your understanding of the ideas presented. It also includes 'tips' – experience-based insights to help you improve your writing and avoid common pitfalls. Finally, there's a handy section on frequently asked questions and a glossary of linguistics terms.

Writing Essays in English Language and Linguistics can be used in different ways to suit your particular purpose:

- it can be read serially from start to finish in preparation for your studies;
- it can be read serially in coordination with the writing of your assignment. In other words, as you reach each stage of your assignment, you can read the relevant section(s) of the book, thereby syncronising the two processes; or
- it can 'dipped into' as a quick-guide reference work as and when you need advice on a particular topic. In this case, you'll probably want to use the more detailed index in combination with the table of contents.

However you decide to use the book, I hope it helps bring you success in your studies.

I would welcome any feedback you may have and, in particular, any suggestions for inclusion in the frequently asked questions section.

Neil Murray
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April 2011

A guide to the book's icons: what do they mean?

Different people will no doubt use this book in different ways to suit their particular needs and learning styles. Whichever style you personally prefer, the following icons and other graphical 'cues' have been used in the design of the book in order to help you navigate through it quickly and easily.

This icon indicates an example or examples. Whenever you see this icon you can expect to find at least one example of the particular point being discussed.

Alongside this icon you can expect to find a piece of advice (a 'tip') or an observation designed to improve your writing in some way. Sometimes it may simply contain an anecdotal remark based on experience of students' writing; at other times it may indicate a concrete suggestion for writing more effectively, or an alert to possible pitfalls.

TRY IT OUT!

Whenever you see this it will be appear in a box and be accompanied by an activity or task designed to get you reflecting on and/or practising a particular idea or approach.

PART 1

THE BASICS

CHAPTER **1**

Writing at school and writing at university: are they really so different?

'I just don't really know what to expect. What exactly are the differences between writing at school and writing at university?'

What's covered in this chapter:
Different philosophies, different writing styles
Shifting the balance: reproduction vs critical analysis
Originality, creativity and 'voice'
The emphasis on research and reading extensively
Depth of analysis and depth of argument
Sound reasoning and the importance of evidence
Transparency, clear organisation and accessibility
References and bibliographies
Appendices
Length

Introduction

Actually, despite the title of this section, the truth is that writing at school and writing at university are not really *that* different. Many of the adjustments you'll need to make to your writing will be adjustments of degree and style as much as anything else. The principles of good academic writing are the same whether you're writing as a high school student or as a postgraduate doctoral student.

'So, why do I need a book of this kind?' you're probably wondering. Well, here are a few reasons:

- Due to such things as time pressure, a full curriculum and student capacity, schools vary in the attention they pay to developing academic writing skills.

- Schools, understandably, tend to focus on training you to produce written work that will earn you good AS/A-level grades. They don't normally prepare you specifically for academic writing at undergraduate level. As a result, certain principles of writing are not covered at all or are covered only superficially, with much important detail often being left out – detail that may be crucial to successful assignment writing at university.
- Traditional thinking has been that undergraduates will learn much of what they need to know 'on the job', once they enter university, through observation, a process of trial and error, and tutor feedback. Unfortunately, these days, the ever-increasing demands being placed on tutors' time means that it's becoming increasingly difficult for them to provide their students with detailed feedback on the form (as opposed to the content) of their writing, with the result that students themselves need to be more resourceful. Furthermore, many students who wish to make a good start with their first assignments feel anxious and uncomfortable about handing in essays without a clear grasp of what's expected of them. In other words, they're not happy to take the risk of 'learning on the job' as this may mean below-par marks in the early phase of their university careers.
- While many academic departments, libraries or information services departments offer leaflets on aspects of academic writing such as referencing and plagiarism, these are often only very brief guides – useful certainly, but not really adequate.

So, although you may well already have an understanding of the basics of academic writing, chances are there are still some things you probably don't yet know or about which you don't yet know enough. A quick look through the Table of Contents on pages vii–x should give you some indication of what you do and don't know.

TRY IT OUT! **#1**

List below what you think some of the differences are between writing at secondary school and writing at university.

	Writing at Secondary School	Writing at University
1.		
2.		
3.		
4.		
5.		

Let's now look briefly at some of the major differences between writing at school and writing at university. As you'll see, the subjects mentioned in

1.1–1.10 below are all closely connected and will be discussed in much greater detail at various points later in the book.

1.1 Different philosophies, different writing styles

At a broad and rather basic level, high school education and university education can be differentiated in terms of purpose. The vast bulk of your education at high school consists largely of developing discipline in your approach to study and building up a body of knowledge that will prepare you for the outside world – both the social world and the world of work – and for the studies you may choose to undertake as an undergraduate student. In contrast, university education exists to build on that foundation with a view to further developing your intellect and powers of analysis, your specialist knowledge of the subject you have chosen to study and your ability to play a role in taking forward that field of study through your own ideas and creativity. This shift of emphasis as you move from high school to university is reflected in the expectations tutors have of your writing. What that means in concrete terms will be discussed in the remainder of this section and, indeed, throughout the remainder of this book.

1.2 Shifting the balance: reproduction vs critical analysis

Although it may be a bit of a generalisation, it's nevertheless true to say that whereas at high school the main emphasis is on absorbing and applying information appropriately according to context (i.e. the particular question or exercise being attempted), at university far greater emphasis is placed on analysing and thinking critically about that information. In other words, there's less stress placed on the simple reproduction of information (the displaying of knowledge), and more on the ability to evaluate or *appraise* it. The nurturing of that ability is very much in keeping with the notion that a university education exists to hone the mind and discipline its students' thinking.

1.3 Originality, creativity and 'voice'

Not only will you be expected to evaluate the information you absorb, you will also need to use it to support your own thinking and bolster your own arguments. If universities exist to develop 'the mind' further and to push the boundaries of knowledge in the various academic disciplines and fields of research, then students must be given free rein to express themselves – to question, to challenge, to disagree, to form their own ideas and propose new ways of looking at things . . . right? In other words, they need to 'find their own voice'. Such a process is key to the advancement of any area of inquiry, and without it many of the great discoveries that have changed the

way we live and think about the world would never have come about. It's not surprising, then, that universities promote its cultivation as early as possible. However, as we'll see, in order to be creative, it's first necessary to be well informed about what has already been said and written concerning the subject on which you're writing, and to provide a sound rationale for your own ideas (see section 3.3, *How to argue*).

1.4 The emphasis on research and reading extensively

In order to give depth to your work and provide a strong basis for your own ideas, you need to have a good understanding of the relevant issues and to have pondered them and tossed them around a bit – perhaps with your fellow students, as well as your lecturers and tutors. If you're to do this effectively, you'll first need to read around the subject in order to familiarise yourself with the relevant literature and what others have said about it. Only then are you really able to comment usefully and with authority. Lecturers quickly know whether a student is well informed or not, whether they have 'done their homework', and when they are bluffing and waffling! If you've read thoroughly, you're in a position to cite the works you've read and to use them in support of your own views and arguments. Remember, to do really well in your undergraduate assignments, you need to go beyond the standard readings you're assigned and the information you absorb in lectures. You need to engage in your own process of inquiry, in part by reading extensively.

1.5 Depth of analysis and depth of argument

University, then, represents the next stage of your intellectual development. Traditionally, a key element in this rite of passage has been the expectation that you'll gradually demonstrate the ability to understand and present concepts and ideas in much greater detail than you may well be used to. It's no longer good enough to merely put down the first idea that comes into your head, or to assume that, after just one take, your first interpretation of an idea is the correct one. You'll need to research ideas more thoroughly and to consider them more carefully and with a critical eye. And when you comment or pass judgement on them, you'll be expected to provide a carefully and logically thought-through rationale based on your own ideas and those of scholars you've read. Quick and superficial responses are – or should be – a thing of the past.

1.6 Sound reasoning and the importance of evidence

A well-structured piece of writing carries conviction and influences its reader. How? Through clear and well-reasoned argument, familiarity with