

Writing Effectively: Strategies for Assessing and Strengthening Your Writing Skills

According to psychologists S. Graham and K. R. Harris, explicitly teaching writing strategies (such as drafting and self-editing strategies) to grade school-age children (who are the subjects of the bulk of current studies on teaching and learning) is most effective for helping them to develop and hone their writing skills (2018). Adding self-regulation strategies (such as S.M.A.R.T. goals and deep breathing) so that they can use these writing strategies more efficiently makes the effects of this focus in writing instruction even more effective (for more information, see Table 2.2 in their study, cited below). By contrast, explicitly teaching grammar skills seems to have no effect on students' writing skills. Therefore, our approach to helping our clients to develop and hone their writing skills is built around teaching writing and self-regulation strategies.

This fact sheet is full of different levels at which to assess your writing so that you, and, if you're meeting with us, we can get a sense of where you've already got strengths and where you'd like our support as you continue to develop as a writer.

Remember: all of these skills are learned and we're all constantly learning and growing as researchers and writers—no one just wakes up one day and is able to write perfectly. Remember, too, that writing is a form of thinking, and the strongest writing almost always takes many MANY drafts!

Writing Strategies, Level 1: Foundations of Written Academic English

Independent clauses and simple sentences have a subject and predicate and are grammatically complete on their own.

- See these two YouTube videos for more information about independent clauses, [linked here](#), and simple sentences, [linked here](#).

Compound sentences combine two independent clauses with coordinating or correlative conjunctions, while **complex sentences** combine one independent clause with one or more dependent clauses, using subordinating conjunctions.

- See this YouTube video for more information on simple, complex, and compound sentences, [linked here](#).

Punctuation and common errors in academic writing are much more complex but are part of the fundamentals of writing in academic English. Some common errors include run-on sentences, comma splice errors, and sentence fragments. For more information, feel free to email us at info@claritydoctors.com.

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Active voice and **passive voice** need to be used intentionally. Often, we default to passive voice (this is especially true for those of us coming from science backgrounds), but passive voice generally makes our writing less clear. For more information on active and passive voice, watch this YouTube video, [linked here](#). And to read more on passive voice, follow [this link](#).

Writing Strategies, Level 2: Structure

As you may already be well aware, how you structure your argument makes a big difference to how persuasive it is to your reader—and structure works at every level in your writing, from connections between sentences, to how your paragraphs are structured and how they connect with each other, through the overall structure of your piece of writing. Here’s some guidance for making sure your academic writing is structured in the clearest possible way. And remember, this is all learned! We can help you with fixing issues at any of these levels in your writing and, if you want, we can help you to build and hone any of the skills associated with academic writing!

Sentence-level structure:

- Connections between sentences help your reader to understand what you’re saying. To help your reader follow your points at the sentence level, use the “inchworm principle,” which is based on the cute little inchworms that move incrementally along branches (Google image search them if you’re unfamiliar with inchworms!).
 - Basically, the inchworm principle, or parallelism, means that, in a given sentence, you’re connecting small point “a” to small point “b” and then, in the next sentence, you start with small point “b” and connect it to small point “c.” This means that you’re creating the links between each small point in your paragraph so that your reader is being carried from one small point to the next and your argument is moving incrementally.

Paragraph-level structure:

- The most fundamental elements of paragraph-level structure can be summarized like this: every part of your paragraph has a specific job! For a quick explanation of these roles, see this quick YouTube video on structuring your paragraphs, [linked here](#). Within your paragraph:
 - The first sentence is your topic sentence. It needs to clearly articulate the facet of your argument that that paragraph covers and to actively argue the part of your argument that that paragraph advances.
 - The middle of your paragraph focuses on the evidence you’re working with and your interpretations of that argument. Be sure you’re taking a clear stance and are putting your voice and your argument upfront throughout it!
 - The final sentence of your paragraph is the concluding sentence, and it needs to sum up the way that the part of your argument that this paragraph has argued and the information we’ve gained through the evidence you’ve covered and how you’ve interpreted has developed your argument. Each paragraph’s concluding sentence should **not** introduce new information!

Overall structure:

- As you're already likely very aware, your writing needs to have a clear introduction, clear sections within your dissertation chapters, academic articles, or Major Research Project, and a clear conclusion.
- There are many strategies for assessing the efficacy of, and for revising, the overall structure of your piece of writing. Some of these are covered in this fact sheet's sister fact sheet, on Getting Unstuck in Writing and others are covered in Level 3 of this fact sheet.

Writing Strategies, Level 3: Drafting and Revising Your Work

One of the biggest barriers for most of us to writing lots and to being able to actually sit down and write is the terrible combination of imposter "syndrome" and high-pressure environment that academia is for all of us. One important way of combatting this is to start your writing by getting your thoughts onto paper and letting yourself keep discovering stuff in your early drafts by writing a few drafts at first that you don't allow yourself to edit!

But how do you stop yourself from editing everything you write? Have a conversation with your very smart and very eager-to-help Editor Brain in which you:

- a) Thank your Editor Brain for its intelligence and eagerness to help you, but tell it that the next two drafts are not its domain.
- b) And then, anytime that your Editor Brain wants to take over in your zero and first drafts, just remind it of the conversation that you've had and remind it also that its time will come!

Drafting: Now that you're ready to start writing, try starting with a zero draft, then moving into a first full draft, and from here, move onto Drafts 2+. What does each draft include, though?

- **Zero draft:** this is your brain dump. Block off time to get this done in as close to a single session as you can. For the zero draft, tell your Editor Brain that this is not its time.
 - You'll know that you're ready to start your Zero Draft when your main research is done, you've got a sense of the field(s) you're engaging with in your writing, and you know where you need to start with your writing. The point of the Zero Draft is to **be curious** about which connections you'll make and where your main points will be.
 - You'll never ever edit your Zero Draft, and you'll show it to no one! It's a low-pressure chance to get your ideas onto (virtual) paper.
 - Once you're done your Zero Draft, go back through it and extract your main points.
 - Now, open a new document—this will be your Draft One—and give it a new document title and **copy and paste** your main points from Draft Zero into Draft One. Then, close your Zero Draft and move onto Draft One!
- **Draft One:** this is your draft for ordering the main points that you've copied and pasted from your Zero Draft and to expand them and so to get the rough structure and the

complete points you're making down in a more complete and more organized draft, with the focus on macro-level organization. Keep your Editor Brain out of this—you want to get through this draft pretty efficiently, too, and after this draft, you'll start editing, so the focus here is just to get it done as continuously and quickly as you can. When you're done Draft One (1), save it and rename your file as Draft Two!

- **Draft Two+**: Now, you're ready to start editing! Thank your Editor Brain for its patience and invite it back in, with all its intelligence and readiness to help. Now, start working on the macro-level structure: which paragraphs do you have? Are you covering only one main idea per paragraph? If not, how can you break up your paragraphs and organize the topics you're covering in each paragraph/paragraph fragment in the most logical order? Once you've got the macro-level order down, you'll start working more at the level of editing within paragraphs and on transitions from one paragraph and its topic to the next. Then, you'll move to the most micro-level editing and work at the sentence level.
 - We do offer editing services across the four level of editing, as laid out in Editors Canada's Definitions of Editorial Skills, [linked here](#), which cover, from macro to micro-level editing: structural editing, stylistic editing, copy editing, and proofreading.

Writing Strategies: Additional Tools

Setting **S.M.A.R.T. goals**: the acronym in "S.M.A.R.T." reminds us to set goals that are specific, measurable, attainable, relevant, and time bound. To help yourself set these goals (keeping in mind, too, that everything takes twice as long as we think it will, even when we take into account this rule), answer these five questions as you're setting your goals and scheduling them in for your project:

SPECIFIC: What, specifically, is it that I want to do?

MEASURABLE: How will I track my progress? Get a system in place that's likely to really work!

ATTAINABLE: Which steps do I need to take to reach my goal? Break your big goal down into smaller sub-goals, and break those down into bite-sized tiny goals that you can actually put on a calendar and check off as you go.

RELEVANT: Why is reaching this goal important to me? To answer this, focus on your personal aspirations; don't rely on external indicators or on others' reactions to your work or progress. You need to find your "why" and use this to motivate yourself. We can help you with this if you want!

TIME BOUND: By when will I have completed this goal? By when will I have completed each sub-goal, then? By when will I have completed the bite-sized steps I need to get through in order to accomplish my sub-goals? → Put all of this on your calendar(s) and set up an accountability system that will give you the support you need to really accomplish these goals.

Having a “**growth mindset**” will help you to develop your writing skills and to succeed in the often-hostile environment that academia offers. But it’s not the terrible false positivity that it sometimes gets incorrectly confused with. Instead, having a “growth mindset” includes:

- Learning to be compassionate with yourself—we’re all learning how to write better throughout our lives!
- Learning to be honest with yourself: which obstacles stand in the way of you working on your writing? Which can you remove by making different choices?
 - For the obstacles that you can address yourself, make a plan for how to address these. For example, if you procrastinate on your work:
 - What are the reasons that you procrastinate?
 - How can you get reassurance and self-soothe around these reasons?
 - Which structures can you try out in your life to see whether they help you to procrastinate less?
- Getting clear on your reasons: why do you want to be a better writer?
 - To answer this, you’ll need to think beyond external accolades. For yourself, why do you want this?
 - Making a plan: which strategies will you try, and which resources will you seek out to keep developing your writing and editing skills?

Prioritizing will also help you to focus as you develop these skills: since it’s not possible to work on everything all at once—and, indeed, trying to do everything at once is almost always prohibitive to actually doing anything!—you’ll be most successful if you get clear on your top priorities for making your writing clearer. To help with this, here are a few questions that we recommend you ask yourself as you’re approaching your later drafts:

1. What are my top three (3) priorities right now for writing more clearly and concisely?
2. What do I already do well?
3. What are my top three (3) areas for improvement?

⇒ Review your S.M.A.R.T. goals: are these top three areas for improvement specific, relevant, and time-bound enough? If not, narrow and clarify them. Now, map them onto a calendar. Remember, we’re here to support you, if you want to work with us. Regardless, be sure to ask for the support you need from the people in your life. You deserve all the support!

Source:

Graham, S., & Harris, K. R. (2018). Evidence-based practices in writing. *Best practices in writing instruction*, 3-29.