

DEMYSTIFYING THE ACADEMIC CODE

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Demystifying the academic code

University study comes with its own set of rules: ways of thinking, reading, and writing. In order to cope, especially at postgraduate level, students have to understand the language and conventions of academic discourse.

“Academic discourse” refers to the type of spoken and written communication that is typical of people who study at and do academic work at universities all over the world. Students need to be able to recognise the various features of this discourse and be able to reproduce them in their own speaking and writing.

Academic discourse has many conventions that distinguish it from other kinds of discourses like the discourse people use at social gatherings or at home with their families. An example of these conventions is the use of noncommittal, tentative and uncertain phrases, such as ‘it is likely that...’ or ‘data would appear to suggest that...’ This convention exists because academics are trained not to assert something as being true, if this cannot be substantiated through evidence.

A further feature of academic discourse is its use of abstract concepts. These are often particularly difficult for students to grasp. Some concepts have been explained in detail in the box below.

| Concept | Explanation |
|-------------|--|
| Argument | The presentation of a case for or against something, with reasons, examples and evidence. |
| Assertion | A statement or claim. A person making an assertion has more certainty than someone making a proposition. |
| Assumption | An idea that is assumed or taken for granted. |
| Issue | A topic about which there is no general agreement. |
| Proposition | A statement offered for consideration. |
| Premise | A proposition or statement from which something else can be inferred or worked out. |
| Statement | A proposition, premise, or assertion, which is factual. |
| Theory | A systematic explanation of something based on patterns that recur during research on that something. |

Academic papers are often written in the form of an argument, report, description or explanation and are based on evidence. Sources are acknowledged through the use of referencing systems. In order to grasp the basic concepts of academic writing, students need to read the types of reports and journal articles that they are expected to write themselves.

Effective Reading

Reading opens up the academic world; it allows students to explore the views of other academics, learn, understand and analyse new knowledge, and is indispensable to all studies. What many students do not realise is that reading effectively includes the active interaction with a given text.

Research has shown that effective readers are active readers. They engage with their texts; look for information that is relevant to their own research; they summarise and anticipate information; they re-read more than once and they question the reasoning behind what they read.

Reading strategy

Here are some tips on becoming an active reader.

Previewing

Previewing stands for the process through which a reader anticipates the content of a text before reading it. Readers can use a checklist before they read a chapter of a textbook, a handout, an article, or a mini-dissertation.

- Read the title, author, date and publication details. What can you work out from this information?
- Who is the writer, and what is his or her viewpoint on the topic likely to be?
- When was the text written?
- Are there clues to the content such as pictures, diagrams and captions?
- What clues do chapter headings, titles and subtitles provide?
- What do you know about the topic?
- What questions do you want the text to answer?

Previewing activates a reader's background knowledge, establishes a framework within which a reader can deal with unfamiliar information, helps select what sections a reader reads, and facilitates effective reading.

Questioning

Asking questions of a text is a key feature of active reading. Before reading a text and while reading, the reader needs to ask questions. Assignment questions can be a main guideline, but topics often offer their own questions, even if a text is not read for assignment purposes. A text may not answer all questions asked of it, and may present a reader with more questions to be answered from further reading.

Reading

Readers have to be conscious of where they are and what they are doing. It is easier to stay alert and focused when sitting at a desk than when lying on a bed, for example. Focusing is often easier when reading-for-study sessions are spaced evenly, with regular breaks and achievable goals.

Looking out for the topic sentence within each read paragraph can further help with a reader to focus and help keep track of a text's main theme and argument.

Reviewing

The purpose of reviewing is to make sure that the reader has understood a text. Reviewing is done during the reading process and at its end. When reading a reader should pause from time to time to reflect on what has been learnt so far.

Taking Useful Notes

Note taking plays an important role in study. Notes can be used when preparing for assignments, revising, reading actively, and reviewing work already covered. Note taking helps promote active reading which, as explained above, is an important tool for any student.

One of the most important skills used during note taking is selection. The student has to choose which information is relevant and has to select the main themes and ideas within a text, handout or textbook.

Purpose and format of notes

There are many styles or methods of taking notes, in other words, there is no correct or incorrect method; different methods work for different people. Notes can be made up of single words, phrases, sentences arranged in linear fashion, or of graphic representation of themes and topics. Often the form for note taking that a student chooses should reflect the purpose for which the notes are used.

| Purpose of note taking | Possible implications |
|---|--|
| For future revision. | Must be easy to retrieve notes when needed. Must be understandable after a time lapse. Must contain all main points and be easy to follow. |
| To provide a record of progress. | Should be well-organised. |
| To make sense of ideas, to sort them out or to order them | Not so important how notes are formatted, as long as they help in sorting out ideas in your head. |
| To help with concentration and active reading. | Not so important how notes are formatted. |
| For an assignment. | Must be accurate and detailed. It would be helpful if they reflect the potential structure of the assignment. |
| For others to use, i.e. study group members. | Must be legible and easy to understand. |

The characteristics of good notes

Although notes can be taken in a variety of forms, all good notes share certain characteristics.

- The main topic, subject and date of the text should clearly show what the notes are based on.
- Headings should be used to highlight main ideas and differentiate between different sections in a clear framework.
- Notes should be taken in phrases and keywords and not in full sentences, which are difficult to review.
- Spaces should be left so that more points can be added later.
- The spacing and layout of the notes should be used for clarity.

Methods of note taking

As mentioned before, there are a number of different methods of note taking, which can be used to focus students' selection of information. One framework which can be used is to search for information using main categories, like the ones set out below.

With this a method a student would organise notes under three categories:

- Principles, concepts, theories and arguments.
- Detailed factual information relevant to the argument.
- A student's own questions or criticisms.

This approach helps promote active reading and provides a framework within which a student can carry out a critical evaluation of the text.

Visual and Graphic Note Taking

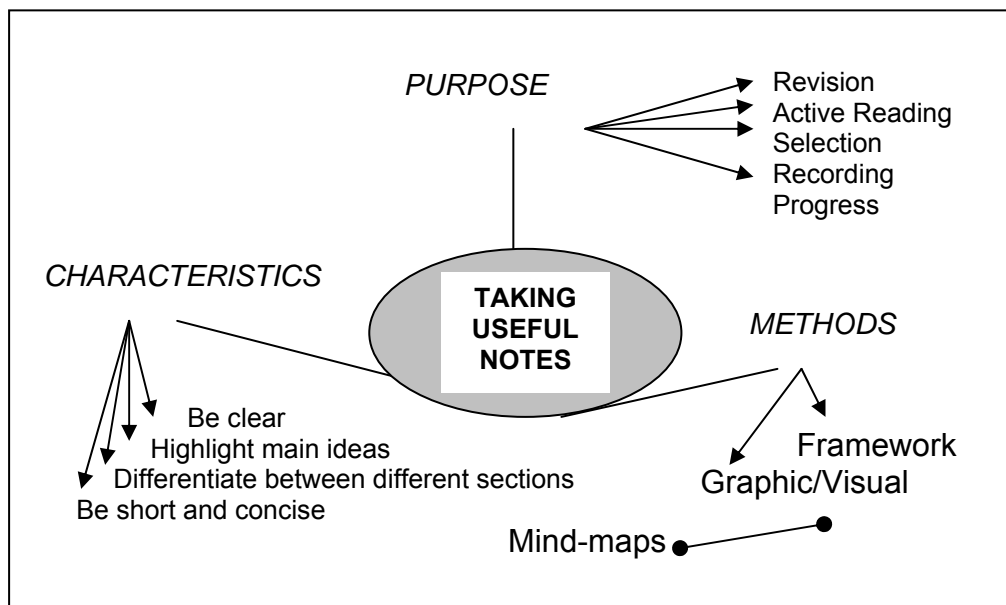
There is no right or wrong way to take notes and students are encouraged to experiment with different methods until they find one that suits their needs and that they feel comfortable with. One note-taking method is to use mind maps.

Mind maps make use of both sides of the brain, the creative, intuitive right half and the logical, sequenced left half of the brain. When you create a mind-map, you combine information into patterns and pictures that are helpful for recalling information, for revision, and for clarifying relationships between arguments, concepts and ideas.

Making a mind map

Mind maps are developed from general to specifics. Once the main subject has been chosen it is written near the middle of a page and circled. All subordinate information is then arranged in relation to the main idea.

In drawing mind maps it is helpful to make use of short phrases and keywords and to add page numbers in brackets, so that additional information can be accessed quickly. Colours can be used to highlight specific information or to indicate relations between points.



Not all mind maps are developed in the spider shape demonstrated above. Depending on the subject matter, mind maps can take the forms of timelines, matrixes, network trees or cycles.

Writing Strategies

Writing an assignment requires a student to make use of a variety of skills. The process followed for writing assignments can be broken down into several steps.

Step 1: Understanding the requirements of the assignment task

The first step in writing an assignment is the unpacking of the assignment question. This means that a student has to analyse the assignment question in detail and has to figure out exactly what is required.

This can be done by underlining the task words in the assignment question and by asking what information is needed. Often this process is made easier by breaking an assignment question up into sub-questions or sections.

Once the first draft of the assignment is finished, the student can go back and check these questions against the draft to see if everything that is required has been covered.

Step 2: Identifying information and taking relevant notes

It is often useful to keep the assignment question in mind while studying and making notes. In this way relevant information can be set aside. Before beginning an assignment students are expected to have studied relevant work and to have read extra material.

During the gathering of information and resources students should further think critically about the information and should internalise it. Having an in-depth understanding of the broad topic covered by an assignment is critical.

Step 3: Developing a structure for the assignment

When developing a structure for an assignment the student decides what should be covered and in what order. Assignments are mostly structured into three main parts: the introduction, main body and conclusion. Structuring an assignment clearly aids in making it readable.

Introduction

The introduction familiarises the reader with the topic and structure of the assignment and gives a general idea of what will be covered. The introduction has to relate to the assignment question and must encourage the reader to carry on reading.

The body

The purpose of the body of the assignment is to present an argument and give evidence validating a certain position. The assignment task analysis can be used to set up a basic structure in the form of sub-headings and section headings.

Conclusion

Conclusions come at the end of an assignment. They signal to the reader that the discussion or argument has come to a close and reinforce the main point made in the assignment. When compiling a conclusion it is important for writers to make sure that the conclusion refers to the main topic of the assignment and that it does not introduce any new ideas.

Step 4: Developing a mind map or framework for the information selected

Once a student has read all available resources, gathered all the information needed and has made notes, the student should use the structure developed above to build up a mind map or framework for the assignment.

Once this mind map has been completed, the student should look at it critically, check for duplications and should try to develop a logical sequence on which the final assignment can be based.

Step 5: Writing a Draft of the assignment and editing it

After writing a first draft of the assignment, using the framework or mind map as a guide, students should get feedback from their lecturer, tutor or a peer and should then self-edit their assignments. Self-editing can be done using a checklist, such as the one provided below:

- Make sure that the assignment begins with a clear introduction (check above for guidelines).
- Make sure that the layout, headings and sub-headings reflect the content of the assignment.
- Check the formatting of assignments.
- Make sure that the font and spacing of the assignment conforms to guidelines given by the lecturer, course instructor, or to the instructions set out in your assignment brief.
- Make sure that arguments are substantiated and that reasons and evidence are provided.
- Check for any repetition.
- Check if the assignment is written in an academic style and tone.
- Check spelling and grammar.

- Make sure that the assignment ends with a clear conclusion (check above for guidelines).
- Check that referencing is accurate and consistent.

Referencing

All students are expected to be familiar with referencing conventions of the SHSPH. They should know how to quote from texts, how to cite works, and should be able to distinguish between quoting and plagiarising.

Plagiarism refers to the use of someone else's words without their acknowledgement. Students must acquaint themselves with the policies and guidelines available at: (<http://upetd.up.ac.za/authors/create/plagiarism/students.htm>)

Different publications, universities and individuals make use of different referencing methods. The main methods are the Harvard and the Vancouver method. Students in the SHSPH are expected to be proficient in the Vancouver referencing method.

Refer to relevant style guides within your department for detailed information on the use of the Vancouver method of referencing. More information on the Vancouver method can be found on the Academic Information Service (<http://www.ais.up.ac.za/med>).