



Session

ACADEMIC WRITING

At the end of this session, international students will:

- Have had the opportunity to explore examples of different forms of writing including academic writing
- Be able to identify general features that are characteristic of Western academic writing
- Be able to appreciate that academic writing and rhetorical structure is impacted by culture
- Be aware that academic writing is discipline specific
- Be alerted to the need to continually develop their knowledge of the language and vocabulary associated with the discipline area of media and communication
- Be able to identify how to construct a paragraph that conforms to expectations for academic writing
- Have had experience in organising ideas into a coherent written paragraph.

How and when to use this material

This Session enables students to develop a better appreciation of how writing in Australian academic contexts differs from academic writing in China. It is suitable to be run:

- within a pre-session course to support the development of general academic writing
- as a stand-alone session to support the development of writing that is specific to the media and communication discipline, or
- split into three separate interventions run over three weeks within regular media and communication teaching.

The session introduces students to the key features of academic writing and enables them to practise constructing paragraphs as a forerunner to constructing longer academic texts, including essays and other forms of academic writing that are typical of the discipline.

A pre-seminar activity is provided that features example paragraphs drawn from a range of sources (articles, textbooks and autobiographic accounts) which include examples that are discipline specific as well as writing that is not, and also a paragraph from a Chinese written and produced English language textbook that is commonly used in English language classes in Chinese universities. Lecturers may, of course, prefer to select their own paragraphs to better mirror or highlight specific unit or program requirements.

The Session forms the basis of all other Sessions associated with writing.

The following Briefing Notes may be useful in providing information around this topic area:

- **Why Chinese postgraduate students struggle with listening, speaking, reading and writing in English**
- **Common problems that Chinese postgraduate students experience in English language usage.**

Note to lecturer

It is important to note that extended academic writing is not an important tool in the Chinese educational system with respect to developing and assessing students' knowledge. In undergraduate programs in China, students are not required to write extensively, even in Chinese. It is useful to appreciate that the writing that students do undertake is often 'bureaucratic' (Kirkpatrick & Xu. 2012). This style of writing within universities is done, not to build and test knowledge, but to prepare students for a future in government employment. This focus on meeting government needs not only impacts style of writing, but also the content of students' writing so as to conform to the requisite ideological agenda within China.

Because Chinese students' experiences of reading in English have also generally been restricted to Chinese English language government-recommended publications (usually a textbook), Chinese students tend to have had very little exposure to different styles of authentic English language text and little appreciation that academic writing is discipline specific. An important part of this Session is to provide this information to students.

Introduction

Writing extensively for learning and assessment is an unfamiliar skill for many postgraduate Chinese students, so academic writing can seem daunting. This Session is based on a 'bite-sized chunk' approach which encourages students to begin tackling the topic by focusing on 'the paragraph' as the fundamental unit in written composition. The Session provides an opportunity for students to explore paragraphs from the following perspectives - as being reflective of:

- Key features of academic writing
- Academic writing in general
- Academic writing that is discipline specific
- The culture of the 'user group'

There are three student activities provided to support this focus. It is possible to split the Session into three, running these over three different days or weeks.

Pre-reading and preparation

In advance of this Session (probably the week before the seminar), give students the selection of written paragraphs that is included in the resource file for this session, **Handout 1: Written paragraphs**. (Alternatively, lecturers may prefer to work with their own unit readings.)

Students should undertake this task prior to the seminar as this forms the basis of the first seminar activity. As a pre-seminar task, ask students to do the following:

- Read the paragraphs
- Try to determine if the paragraphs are examples of English language academic texts
- Try to determine which of the paragraphs are discipline specific (Media and Communication) academic texts.

Provide students with **Handout 2: Features of academic writing and associated language**. Suggest that they use the information on this handout to help them with the decisions about their paragraphs.

Student activity 1: Identifying academic writing

Lecturer input: before beginning the activity

Talk with students about the differences in purpose and style between the writing they did in China at university and the writing that they are required to do here in Australia. Use questions/headings like 'What did you write?', 'Why did you write it?' as a way of getting into a discussion about the composition and style of written assignments as well as their length.

Also ask students what they have noticed about written assignments here in Australia. Brainstorm a list of words / phrases that they use (e.g. "very long") and list them on the whiteboard. Remind them as they do this to refer to

Handout 2: Features of academic writing and associated language.

Point out that writing is a cultural activity, that what and how people write reflects cultural practices, beliefs and values.

- Distribute **Handout 3: Written paragraph instructions.**
- In groups of three, students should compare their decisions. Each group is to try to develop consensus about the paragraphs.
- Whole class discussion. Reasons for decisions discussed with reference to the **Handout 2: Features of academic writing and associated language.**

Note to lecturer

Brief information about the sources of each of the paragraphs is included in **Teaching Note 1: Identifying the written paragraphs.** This information can be used in your discussion with the students to help them think about different types of writing as well as help identify academic writing.

- Students to be provided with the reference list for the paragraphs, **Handout 4: References for written paragraphs.** Students to use this:
 - To help confirm their decisions
 - As an example of academic referencing
- Lecturer to check student decisions with respect to each of the paragraphs.

Student activity 2: Paragraph structure and academic writing

Lecturer input: before beginning Student activity 2

Display **Slide: Hamburgers and paragraphs** which is a picture of two different types of hamburger. Ask if students can identify a connection between a paragraph and a hamburger. Support this discussion with the use of the **Handout 5: Constructing a paragraph**. Ask students which of the hamburgers looks the best / tastiest. Link this to the idea of a good academic paragraph usually having a number of supporting sentences (lots of filling between the buns). (**Note:** the hamburger analogy is often used as an explanation for the construction of a paragraph. The top bun is like the topic sentence. This, together with the bottom bun (concluding sentence), holds together all the juicy bits of the hamburger (supporting sentences).

- Divide students into pairs. Distribute **Handout 6: Jumbled paragraphs** intact or cut up the sentences in advance and distribute a set to each pair of students. (Note: the latter is more effective in engaging students.)
- Using the information contained in **Handout 5: Constructing a paragraph**, students are to reconstruct the paragraph so that the sentences are in the correct order.
- Pairs to compare their reconstructed paragraphs.
- Nominate one pair who reconstructed correctly to explain why they chose to order the text the way they did. **Slide: Reconstructed paragraph** shows the correct sequencing.
- Lecturer to recap key points:
 - A paragraph discusses one main subject
 - A paragraph comprises the topic sentence, supporting sentences and usually a concluding sentence

Student activity 3: Writing an academic paragraph

- There are a number of suggested topic sentences included in **Teaching Note 2: Topic sentences**. Lecturer to choose one of these or provide own.
- Students to write a paragraph comprising at least seven sentences.

- Paragraphs (without names) to be displayed in the classroom.
- Students to vote for the one they consider best adheres to the conventions of academic writing (and they need to be able to explain why). Perhaps the winner could be rewarded with a McDonald's voucher.
- To conclude the session, students should add discipline specific vocabulary / phrases that they have encountered in this session to their personal glossaries so that they can learn them, and then incorporate them in their own academic writing.

Note to lecturer

To finish, ensure that students have grasped that they need to develop an understanding of the different conventions associated with the genre or text-types that are typical of their area of study. The importance of students needing to develop discipline specific vocabulary can also be highlighted.

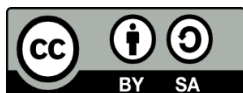
Students can be directed to the relevant online dictionaries available via their library such as: Chandler, D. & Munday, R. (2011) *A Dictionary of Media and Communication*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

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Additional materials and resources are available from
<http://chinapostgraduates.murdoch.edu.au>

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