

A short guide to academic writing in Part II for students of Linguistics, English Language, and Sociolinguistics

What do we mean by an "essay" in Linguistics and English Language?

- Linguistics is a science
- Academic literature in linguistics is written in scientific report style
- This is different to the "standard essay" style of the arts and humanities
- This style is used in all research publications in linguistics
- For an example, see *nearly any* book or article published in the field.

Structuring an essay in scientific report style

- Your essay should be organised into sections with numbered headings
 - Each section deals with ONE point or topic that is important to your essay
 - When you move to a new issue/point/topic, start a new section
- Sections range in length from a single paragraph to a couple of pages
 - If your section gets longer than this, split it into two or more subsections
 - Also use subsections if there are a number of "sub-points" relating to one overarching point

Example: an essay about wildebeest →

- Give every section a heading, with a number in the style 1, 1.1, 1.2, 1.3, 2, 2.1, 2.2 etc.
- *Don't* number every individual paragraph
- *Don't* use numbers like 1.0, 2.0 etc. (there is no "zeroth" section)
- Main-body sections should develop your argument, present data, discuss the literature etc.
- If you have started by creating an essay plan (which is recommended!) then each point on your plan can be developed into a section of the essay
 - You can always tweak the structure later on
- There are three special sections – the introduction, the conclusion and the references list

What are the key facts about Wildebeest?

1. Introduction

This essay will, in several sections, describe some key facts about Wildebeest.

2. About wildebeest

2.1. What is a wildebeest?

A wildebeest is a large animal, also known as a Gnu. There are two species of Wildebeest: the Black Wildebeest and the Blue Wildebeest.

2.2. What are a wildebeest's closest relative?

The wildebeest is closely related to cattle, deer, goats, antelopes, and other similar animals.

3. Wildebeest lifestyle

3.1. Habitat

Wildebeests live in Africa, on plains and in open woodland.

3.2. Diet

Wildebeest eat grass.

3.3. Migration

Wildebeest migrate in May and November, following the seasonal growth of the grasslands.

The introduction

- In scientific-report style, an "introduction" is not like the introduction to a book
- Rather it is a "roadmap to the essay"
- What you should do: explain how the essay is structured and what each section will do
 - "In section 2 I will..."; "Section 3.1 discusses ..."; "In section 4, I will move on to consider the issue of ..."
- What to avoid: airy general introductory statements
 - "X has been studied for over 40 years now; it has been a topic of very great interest to many linguists."
- The introduction should be no more than 1 or 2 paragraphs in all

The conclusion

- The conclusion should *summarise* your essay by looking back over the main points you have made in each section
- It should then bring all those points together to provide an *answer to the question*
- The conclusion will normally be no longer than a page or so
- A conclusion of only five or six lines is too short and may lead to you losing marks
- Don't introduce new material or new arguments in the conclusion

The references section

- A list of *all and only* the works you have referred to in the text of the essay
- Put this after the conclusion but before any appendices
- *See separate materials on how to lay out references in the text and references list*
- The most important point: in Linguistics, we use the "Author (Date)" type of reference
 - Also called "APA style" or "Harvard style"
- You should *never* use the "footnotes-for-references" method that is used by English Literature and other arts/humanities subjects.

Answering the question

- The biggest cause of low marks for essays is *failure to answer the question as set*
- Common pitfalls:
 - Writing about the area in general, rather than the specific thrust of the question
 - Writing about all the topics that were introduced in the lecture that relates to the question
 - (If the topic of the question was introduced in Lecture 4 of LING222, that *doesn't mean* that every other topic in lecture 4 of LING222 is necessarily relevant)
- When you have finished your essay, always read it back to check that it is a direct answer to the question as set and not a generalised discussion.
- Always use the original question as the title of your essay; don't make up a title of your own, unless it is an assignment where you have an individualised topic.

Academic style: *be clear, be explicit, be relevant*

- In scientific writing, we are aiming above all else for *clarity*.
 - The clearest styles are the simplest.
 - Two short sentences are always better than one long sentence.
 - Avoid complicated tangles of subordinate clauses
 - Avoid unnecessarily exotic choice of vocabulary; plain and simple words are almost always better
 - Exception: technical linguistic terms, which should be used according to their technical definitions
 - Tables, figures, charts, bullet-point lists can be used instead of paragraphs of prose where appropriate
- Always be as explicit as possible about the point you are making
 - Nothing is too obvious to be stated explicitly
 - If you don't "spell it out", the marker can't give you credit for it
- Make sure everything you write is relevant to the goal of the essay
 - The essay as a whole must answer the question as set (see above)
 - Every section within it must contribute towards answering the question
 - All material in each section must be relevant to this task
 - You *can* state explicitly why certain material is relevant if this is not obvious
- Think through the logic of your argument carefully
 - If you say that A follows from B, or that "C, therefore D", or that fact X shows that Y must be correct or incorrect...
 - ... then you must make sure that it *really does follow* and that there are no "logical gaps" or jumps

Supporting claims and arguments

- Every point you make must be supported
- Nothing is valid just because you say it
- What you “think” doesn’t matter; what matters is what you can *show*.
- You can back up a statement by *evidence* or by *reference to the literature*
 - Evidence: a linguistic example, some statistics, other data
 - Reference to the lit: quotation or citation
- Avoid the “in my opinion ...” type of paragraph: it is too easy for this to fall into the trap of unsupported claims and over-general sweeping statements.

Sources, quotations, and citations

- How many quotations/citations do you need to use?
- QUOTATIONS do not need to be especially frequent
 - It is possible to write an entire essay without quotations
 - Use a quotation only when your source phrases the point in the exact way that you want to phrase it
 - Otherwise, just paraphrase the point and then provide a citation
- CITATIONS should be very frequent indeed in your essay
 - EVERY FACT or IDEA that you introduce *must* be supported
- You should be giving references to your sources *at least several times a page*
 - (Exception: a section of the essay devoted solely to analysis of your own data, where references may be rarer)
 - It doesn’t matter if you end up giving the same reference lots of times
- When you do your reading – on paper or on the Internet – make sure you keep a note of *all* the necessary details for *all* your readings
 - For everything: author, title, date
 - For a book: *also* publisher, place of publication
 - For a journal article, *also* journal title, volume/issue number, page numbers
 - For a chapter in a collection, *also* page numbers, title of book, editors’ names, publisher, place of publication
 - For online sources, *also* URL, your access date

Using the internet

- Most academic journals can now be accessed via the web.
- Using these is obviously fine and they do not need to be treated as “web sources”
- Other online sources require a bit more care.
- Be *very careful* in choosing web sources; 99% of what is on the web is total rubbish
- How to spot a legitimate source on the web:
 - It should be attributed to a KNOWN, NAMED source (person or organisation) that you know is a LEGITIMATE ACADEMIC SOURCE
 - *Good source*: a web-page written by a named individual who you know is a legitimate researcher in the field
 - *Bad sources*: web pages for the layman, essays posted on students’ personal web pages, publicity web pages
- Questions to ask:
 - Who wrote this?
 - How does this person know that what they are saying is correct?
 - Is this person affiliated to a legitimate research/teaching organisation?
 - If you can’t answer these questions, think again about using this source
- *Good signs*: .edu or .ac.uk web addresses (but watch out for student homepages)
- *Bad signs*: blogs and other free web-space sites (anyone can write one)
- **Wikipedia is not a legitimate academic source.** You should never cite it.

Planning your coursework

- If in doubt about an essay, *ASK* the lecturer or tutor
 - We would much rather take time to discuss it with you, than mark a bad essay
- Don't hand in your essay late – the penalties are severe
 - Allow yourself more time than you think you will need – expect the unexpected
 - *Don't* plan to do your essay all in a rush at the last minute (e.g. in the weekend before the deadline) – this leaves no "slack" in case of problems or crises
 - One suggestion: begin work around six weeks before the deadline and spread the work out alongside your other essays – this helps reduce the pressure
 - *Don't* skip lectures or seminars to work on your essay – this only causes problems in the long run
- Don't keep the only copy of your essay in a single place or on just one computer
 - Use a USB data stick as a backup
 - Use the university's H: drive as a backup
 - Use your email account as a backup

Spelling and grammar

- Spelling mistakes are *not acceptable* at undergraduate level; there are no excuses!
- Don't rely on the spell-checker: you *must* proofread. Look out for:
 - its/it's, their/there/they're
 - where/were/we're/wear
 - possessive apostrophe
- Take special care with technical linguistic terms and names of authors
 - They are unlikely to be in your spell-checker's dictionary
 - Misspelling them looks *really* bad
- Grammatical errors are unlikely if you follow the "keep it simple" advice above
- Ignore the recommendations of the grammar checker (or simply turn it off).

Basic presentation of the finished piece of coursework

- All coursework must be word-processed
 - (some modules e.g. LING202 may allow handwritten weekly analysis exercises)
- Text must be double-spaced
- Indent the first line of every paragraph (by pressing TAB)
- Use *Times New Roman* or another neutral font
- Font size – use nothing smaller than 10 point, nothing larger than 12 point
- Other text fonts/sizes are OK for headings
- Work printed on both sides of the paper is acceptable
 - *But* make sure the ink has not "bled through" the paper
- Make sure you have adequate margins
 - (at least 3cm left and right, at least 2cm top and bottom)
- Make sure the actual essay (*not just the coversheet*) has your name on it (e.g. in a page header)

Handing in the coursework

- Hand in your essay with a completed, signed coversheet
- Don't hand in a large or bulky folder
- Staple the pages together, or use a simple plastic wallet if it's too big to staple
- Don't leave it till the last minute:
 - Don't try to print out your essay in the library half an hour before the deadline
 - Don't leave town to hand in your essay an hour before the deadline – you can't predict how full the buses will be or what the traffic will be like
- Don't forget your electronic submission.

This guide was written by Andrew Hardie based on Lancaster University's LING200 lecture "Academic writing at Part II" and was last updated in September 2010.