Academic writing skills for today’s competitive professional environments

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Academic writing: a growing field of study

Writing (and speaking) skills were overlooked in the past, especially at graduate and post graduate levels.

Globalization – more international students studying in Anglophone countries – brought more attention.

More attention led to more research in the field, and nearly all western university students now have the resources to produce higher quality texts (oral and written) on a broad scale. This applies to native and non-native speakers of English.
The International Writing Centers Association (2013) counts that there are now over 1,000 Centers like ours in U.S. and Canadian universities – and equal numbers in the U.K.

The point is not that we are few among many; the point is that we are extremely important to help prepare our students for today’s international job market, where they must compete with students who have had Academic Writing training.

http://writingcenters.org/
More than 300 students from over 30 countries study at CERGE-EI every year.
Highly competitive academic environment = growing specialized expertise in academic writing teachers

CERGE-EI Academic Skills Center Faculty: Related Master’s degrees from Western universities

Academic interests and experience
What is ‘academic writing?’

The answer will be different for every institution and every faculty.
In our CERGE-EI case: graduate students of Economics

Provide courses and individual instruction to help intermediate and advanced writers and speakers of English structure complex data, develop and express extended arguments, and position their work as a contribution to ongoing research and debate in their field.
Academic Writing in English for Graduate Students of Economics from Slavic Language Backgrounds

• Is there a textbook?
• What would the title of ‘your’ textbook be?
Literature related to our CERGE-EI Academic Writing Program:

- Economics Rhetoric
- Economics Education
- General English Language Writing
- Applied Economics, especially for Science Writing and First Language Influence
The American Economic Review. Available at: https://www.aeaweb.org/journals/aer


A few examples of literature we refer to
Our Core Courses

• Academic Writing 1
• Academic Writing 2
• Combined Skills (presentation of a paper)

Courses are mandatory, impact student GPA, linked to content study.
Our Core Courses

- Usually 12-14 students per class
- Each student writes on his/her own choice of topic in the field of Economics (more challenging for the teachers, but more meaningful for the students)
Focus on setting reasonable standards balanced with an individual approach

• The Academic Skills Center faculty work to define reasonable, consistent standards for each graded writing task that apply to all students on a course.

• We balance this by providing individual feedback in consultations and by providing detailed feedback on student papers.
Students are responsible for the quality of their writing.

In consultations, students are expected to arrive with questions prepared. They are responsible for identifying where they think their writing needs improvement. We do not read or correct draft work for them.
Genre Awareness

We consider ways that writing in this context differs from other types of writing and from writing at the Master’s and undergraduate level. We explicitly consider ways formal writing in English differs from formal writing in Slavic languages.
We study text organization, and constructing effective introductions and conclusions.
We highlight language for expressing analysis and framing stances towards the work of other writers.
Special attention is paid to (avoiding) common English errors
Academic Writing 2: Writing about one’s own new ideas

- Academic Position Paper Task
- Synthesizing one’s own new idea/s into existing literature
- Expressing ‘confident uncertainty’
Students process their writing through continuing revision of draft work from the idea stages to the final version, in response to peer and instructor feedback on draft texts.
The course also includes specialized workshops on articles (a, an, the), punctuation, and writing abstracts.
Combined Skills:

- Write and present a research proposal
- Individual, may collaborate with Economics professors through the process.
- Student-led classes and explicit presentation practice that considers the differences between teaching and presenting, and the challenges of presenting to a neutral (not necessarily friendly) audience.
What students have to do to pass

Produce specific writing tasks to a reasonable standard, applying the main principles taught on the course.

For Combined Skills, there is also a graded presentation.
Our main learning channels

Classes

Homework (writing)

Individual Consultations and Feedback

Library Workshops
Our main lesson platforms

Library Resources

- Lecture/Inputs
- Discussion & Tasks
- Peer Review
- Process Writing
- Self-study
Our main aids

Learning is supported by a Moodle platform and use of Turnitin as a teaching tool.
Approach to plagiarism

- Acknowledge to Knowledge
- How Turnitin works
- What it is & how it occurs
- CERGE-EI handbook
- Academic Community
What we say to our students about how Turnitin works

Turnitin does not detect plagiarism. It shows us what text is from other sources. A professor must judge if there is plagiarism.
14% “More paraphrasing needed (too much direct quotation).”

16% “Insufficient in text referencing.”

27% “Matching score indicates overreliance on wording from original text.” In this case the grade was lowered by one letter grade.

No problems

18 and 22 were fine – writers included some properly cited charts and graphs from the original and all the references.
Not quite so bad as it looks....
The paper observes the 1999 Czech end-of-four-year-program test scores (hereafter referred to as "Maturita") in the fields of Mathematics and native Czech, and merges the latter with the 1999 administrative register of applicants to Czech Universities, thereby analyzing the admission performance of all the university applicants in 1999 who have available Maturita scores. Authors employ least-squares female-dummy coefficients from admission regressions employing respective subjects' Maturita test scores, the secondary-school type, the average success rate of students from a given secondary school in admissions, and a full set of dummy variables for the subject-of-study of university programs.

The paper seeks to establish whether men outperform women of similar ability, as measured by the Maturita test scores, and of similar secondary-school quality, as measured by school average university admission rate, in university admissions. Indeed, large and statistically significant gender gaps favoring male admissions are found for very competitive university programs (where admission rate is below 19 per cent), suggesting that women are significantly disadvantaged in their access to selective schools. When observing the most able

REPERENCES

Using their own prior work: ‘Recycling’

We tell them: “If you happen to be a student from ISET, or from Westminster Tashkent, and you submitted a paper there, and you use some parts of it in a paper submitted to CERGE-EI, we will see exactly what you are re-using.”

This is ok if approved in advance!!!
We have very few ongoing problems with student plagiarism
Other Academic Skills Center Services

Assistance with MA theses
Individual consultations for Dissertation Proposal Workshop preparation
Editing for working papers and other institutional works
Open hours – anyone connected with CERGE-EI is welcome to drop by with any face-to-face work (not extensive editing)
Academic writing is impossible without library staff and resources.
The CERGE-EI Jan Kmenta Library supports the success of our student’s writing by providing top-quality international resources.
As a part of our Academic Writing courses, the library provides workshops on a range of library skills from basic to very advanced, and on using the most up to date resources.
And the future.....

Digital course development:
We look forward to collaboration with our library on this!