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This is not an accurate word-for-word transcript of the programme.

ANNOUNCER:

It's time for **Academic Listening** - a series for students at English-speaking universities. Join Susan Fearn and members of the World Service class of 2001 for this programme that focuses on academic writing.

Susan: We thought about how to make best use of the university library and how to gather relevant material quickly and efficiently. Now it's time to start writing ... a daunting prospect for many students.

CLIP: Students

I really need help, particularly in writing and in grammar. I need to know how can I write a sentence with the correct form - I think this is very important.

During my masters I will have ten assignments and I need to write a report - ten reports - and at the end of the masters I have a dissertation to write, so writing is the most important thing for me. I have a problem to write because I have some topics and I have ideas. I make only one or two pages where I can make, if it is in my native language, ten or fifteen.

Susan: At most universities, students are judged by a series of written tests. You may be asked to produce essays, reports, dissertations. You may well be familiar with the three hour exam paper.

CLIP: Exam begins

Transcript not available

Susan: It makes me shudder to think about it! Well, today and in the next programme, we'll be thinking about how you're expected to write as part of the academic community, and we're hoping to make the writing process seem just that little bit easier.

CLIP: Christine Reeves

There are different elements you could focus on - individual elements which would give you confidence in some areas - for example, how to write a definition, give examples, how to compare and contrast, how to describe cause and effect... These are some of the individual elements that would be very useful.

Susan: Christine Reeves teaches English at Bell Norwich – a language school in the East of England.

CLIP: Christine Reeves

Then you need to look at the organisation of your writing which is also very important. You need to know how to select information, how to plan your essay, how to write an introduction and a conclusion. And some of the quite difficult elements that you would need to study would be how to give quotations, how to give references - the rules are very very strict in British universities, and you need to know the format.

Susan: Whether your university is in Britain or elsewhere in the world, in your written work you will be expected to follow certain stylistic conventions. There are rules and guidelines that you can learn. Some teachers also suggest that you can improve your assignments by focusing on the writing process itself.

Tony Lynch is a senior lecturer at the Institute for Applied Language Studies at the University of Edinburgh.

CLIP: Tony Lynch

By process I have in mind getting used to the cyclical nature of writing, thinking of writing as a series of loops, planning an outline, drafting, adding ideas at various points, revising and so on. And all of the parts of the process are important - if you don't give yourself enough time for any one of them you'll end up with a piece of writing that is less good than it would otherwise be.

Susan: According to Tony Lynch, it's helpful to think of the writing process as a series of stages. The first of these consists of drawing up a preliminary outline for your assignment. Next comes a period of research before you write your first draft. Then you can revise and improve your draft, and write the final version to hand in to your tutor. In fact, within reason, you can go on revising and redrafting your material as many times as you like until you reach the deadline for submitting the work.

Tony Lynch says the first crucial stage of the writing process is to make sure you fully understand what it is you're being asked to do.

CLIP: Tony Lynch

The most important first thing to do when you've been set a task, an assignment to write is simply to read the question. This is more complicated than it sounds because you may read the

question in terms of understanding the separate words, but if I give you an example from an exam question, the first word in the question could be the word discuss and the problem is that discuss is actually used to cover two sorts of answer - one would be discuss in the sense of debate or show both sides of a question and then give your conclusion; and it's also used in some areas to mean discuss in the sense of describe, to present. So the very first thing a student needs to do is make sure they have interpreted the question correctly, if in doubt ask someone, if possible ask the person who set the question.

Susan: Once you've read and understood the question, it's time to start making your essay plan. Tony Lynch suggests taking a piece of paper and quickly writing down any thoughts, ideas and questions as they occur to you – a process sometimes known as brainstorming.

CLIP: Tony Lynch

Brainstorming is a technique which largely consists of giving yourself perhaps a couple of minutes to jot down as many ideas, words, phrases that you link with the topic that's being discussed. I usually do it by taking a sheet of paper and I write the topic in the middle of the paper and I find myself drawing out lines like the legs of a spider to the corners of the paper and adding in anything that comes into my head. When you've done that you may begin to see a pattern emerging and you might for example see the order in which you might write about the various things that you've decided are important.

Susan: When you're brainstorming, it's important to allow your ideas to flow rapidly -- you don't need to worry about being neat – and you may find that you get some interesting and unexpected associations. You can then start to arrange your thoughts into groups. There'll be some ideas you want to discard, and others you want to develop. You can then use your notes to plan the general structure

of your essay or project. The next stage of the writing process is to do some research. Your lecturer will probably be able to give you a list of relevant books and articles to refer to. By now, you will have a list of questions that you want to answer ... and these questions will help you select the most relevant reading material, and to make useful notes. Tony Lynch again.

CLIP: Tony Lynch

Note-making is a very important part of the writing process - it saves a great deal of time. Not only writing down content of what you're reading, but also most important to write down the details of the author, the publication details, if a journal, the volume and issue number - all the details that you'll need to refer to later to write up in your list of references. If you get it right first time, it saves you time later.

Susan: We'll return to the subjects of research, making notes and keeping references in the next programme. What we can say today is that you'll probably find that new ideas occur to you as you carry out your research. It may become clear that certain areas are much more important or interesting than others. So, you may want to adjust your preliminary outline - before you start writing your first draft. And as you start to expand your preliminary outline, don't be afraid to draw on your own previous experience.

CLIP: Student Arturo

The matter of a good structure in an essay, it doesn't have to be about language only. Even if you write very well letters or a diary in English - to write an essay it requires a methodology - you learn it in your country, your university - if you have former experience of writing essays, or academic works, it's easier.

Susan: Sometimes I find that the hardest part of writing anything is actually getting started. But I usually find it's easier sometimes to make progress once I've got something written down. With an essay I often leave writing the introduction till near the end - when I know exactly what it is I've been writing about. It can be very helpful, to ask another student to read your work. It's often easier for someone else to tell whether what you've written is clear and logical. You can offer to help your colleagues by reading their work. Critical evaluation of someone else's writing will make you a better critic of your own. Finally, if you're given the opportunity, don't be embarrassed to show your draft to your tutor or lecturer.

CLIP: Tony Lynch

The most important thing about showing a draft to someone, particularly a tutor, is to get their reaction - it's very easy when you're writing to get so involved in your text that you can't really stand outside it to judge it. And by giving your draft to someone you very quickly - positively, negatively or both - you get the feeling for how the text is being received by a first reader.

Susan: You're now in a position to write the final version of your work and to give it to your tutor. You may find that this process seems to take rather a long time. But if you persevere, you'll probably find by the third or fourth essay that your writing has improved, both in speed and quality. That's certainly the experience of one of our students.

CLIP: Student

For me this has been an important experience, not only because it enables me to improve my English academic writing, but also because it gives me tools to write in Norwegian better than I used to.

Susan: Above all, remember, it's not a sign of failure to revise and rewrite your essays. It's sometimes said that the only difference between professional and other writers is that professional writers do more revisions of their work. And if our advice today has all sounded rather daunting, here are some final words of encouragement from Tony Lynch.

CLIP: Tony Lynch

People often ask me: is it possible to learn to do academic writing? And the answer is yes - because that's what everybody does. When I first went to university, I wasn't an academic writer from the first day, I had to learn it in the same way as everybody else. We all serve an apprenticeship as writers. You can't do it in theory, it's not something that's inborn, it's something you gradually get used to.

Susan: And that brings us to the end of today's programme, in which we've discussed the process of academic writing. We've suggested that it's a good idea to approach writing as a number of stages in which you prepare and revise draft versions of your work.

ANNOUNCER:

Next time, we'll focus more closely on academic register and writing in a style that's appropriate for your academic community.