

BBC Learning English

Talk about English

Academic Listening

Part 10 - Academic writing part 2



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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 as they continue to look at academic writing.

Susan: No-one ever said that being a student would be easy! But we start today with a practical tip from one of our World Service students. If two brains are better than one – why not team up with other students when you study ... especially when you're working on a written assignment.

CLIP: Student Emma

When it comes to students helping each other - say for example you are given an assignment - we always get three topics, and we choose one, and we have what we call e-groups and we e-mail each other and everyone says - I've taken the first question: anyone who's interested to have a discussion about that? So you come together as a group for the same question, do your research and discuss it, and everyone shares their ideas and then go and write your assignment - give it to each other to read - especially to check the grammar. We always make use of

students with English as a first language. This is very helpful.

Susan: You may find that you've got plenty of ideas for your essay, but that it's hard to express them in accurate and appropriate English. Or you may have problems organising your written work. Well, last time we suggested that it's a good idea to approach writing as a series of stages in which you prepare and revise draft versions of your work. Today, we'll think about some of the stylistic conventions that you have to follow as a writer of academic English, and we'll think a little more about the research stage of the writing process.

Brainstorming is something you could do with other students. But wouldn't that be cheating? Not according to Tony Lynch. He's a senior lecturer at the Institute for Applied Language Studies at the University of Edinburgh.

CLIP: Tony Lynch

On this question of students collaborating on writing - I don't have a problem with that personally. I'm quite happy if my students work together - my experience is, when students collaborate on an essay assignment, even if they are all doing the same essay, they don't end up with the same text. I think some lecturers are afraid that they'll end up with a single text written by 30 people who hand in 30 copies of the same thing - that's not my experience. And in fact when I was a student we were encouraged to work together in what were called 'syndicates' - even preparing exam answers, so we would discuss the questions in advance and work out what we thought a good answer would be.

Susan: As we've already noted in this series, the quality of your assignments as a university student will depend partly on the quality of your research. We've spoken about how to make best use of the university library and how to gather

relevant information quickly and efficiently. [We also suggested that your lecturer might be able to give you a list of books and articles to refer to. But if you get no such help, try to find a recent publication with a bibliography or list of references. Then, use this as a starting point to direct you to other material. Simon Williams teaches English in the Language Centre at University College London.

CLIP: Simon Williams

Be systematic in the use of the reference list at the back of a book. You can use it to find other books that might be helpful, and for that reason, start with a contemporary book. Using the reference section of a book, you're going to build on the work someone else has already done. Sharing in academic community, you'll make your own contribution in the work you do.

Susan: Libraries contain thousands of books – and you can't read them all. You need to make sure you select what's most relevant for your topic or assignment. As you read, make a note of any interesting or key points. But again, be selective. Be clear about your purpose for writing the notes. You won't need notes on everything. Think too about how you keep your notes. One technique is to use a series of cards.

CLIP: Student

I write notes and cards before writing the manuscript and I organise the cards according with the subject, and you classify your notes according to the main subject (transcript not available)

Susan: If you make your notes on cards, you could try writing only one point on each and using only one side of the card. Then, when you come to write your assignment, you can arrange and rearrange the cards in the most appropriate order, making new sequences and discarding the unwanted ones. Try to be consistent in the way you lay out your notes. Make sure there's a heading on each page or card, and that you make a note of the source. If you add any of your own comments, make sure you can distinguish these from the author's ideas. Where possible, Simon Williams recommends paraphrasing what the author has said

CLIP: Simon Williams

As you're reading, keep notes of key quotes – ideally try to re-express what the writer is saying in your own words. Two reasons: it makes your own writing more fluent, less feeling that is being interrupted by other speakers. Secondly, it means that you're having to manipulate material, think through the implications of the ideas. So you're working with the material in your mind, understanding it more and applying to new situations.

Susan: Tony Lynch points out that it's essential to keep an exact record of any sources you use. In the British and in many other university systems, if you quote from the work of others, you're obliged to acknowledge the original author. If you fail to do this, you may be accused of *plagiarism* and severely penalised.

CLIP: Tony Lynch

Plagiarism is using someone else's ideas or someone else's words without acknowledging that they are the source. So it's quite simple to avoid - you avoid it by making sure that when you are writing up your notes from your reading that you do take the correct details, the

publication details, and when it comes to the stage of writing up that you make clear in your text which ideas - in fact which quotations - are coming from which source. In terms of how to avoid it it's very simple - the bigger question is why, why should you avoid it. And I'm afraid the answer is and at least in the culture that I work in Britain a student who doesn't acknowledge the source is assumed to be wanting to hide the fact that she or he has used material, in other words that they are trying to present someone else's ideas as their own.

Susan: This is not to say that you shouldn't quote from the work of other authors. In fact, evidence of wide reading is often one of the criteria for high marks. What's important is to acknowledge all your sources.

Collecting this information can be time-consuming – which is why it's much better to make a note of all the relevant details *as you carry out* your research. In the very first programme of this series we said that when you become a student you join a community of people who use English in a particular way. As a member of that community you have to follow the same stylistic guidelines and conventions. The people who will read and mark your work will expect this. Tony Lynch again.

CLIP: Tony Lynch

You have to make sure of course that what you write is what the reader wants. In the case of university level writing, the person to check with is the person who sets the title - the lecturer. It's not always clear, even if lecturers think it is, what exactly they want by way of an answer so the shortest way to make sure you answer what they want is to check with them.

Susan: Your tutor is a very good person to advise you on questions of style and appropriate register, and on how the university requires you to present your work. Keeping your reader in mind as you write may also influence the actual

content of your work.

CLIP: Student

This is written with my supervisors in mind ... and the people who are going to read it. Since I write for specialists in this area, I have to display that I know. I don't have to explain a lot, I have to display my knowledge.

Susan: You'll find that academic writing becomes easier with practice. And you'll find that the more academic reading you do, the more familiar you'll become with the stylistic conventions used by academics in your field and which you'll need to follow. This would be true for any student in any country, as Tony Lynch points out.

CLIP: Tony Lynch

Students often say to me - I understand what you are saying and writing in Britain, but do I have to become like a British student? And the answer is - no, but you have to play to the same rules of the game as the British student does. The British student has the advantage of knowing what the rules are, and the overseas student needs to keep to the same rules - if they don't do what the British reader expects them to do, they'll end up getting a lower mark than they would have done otherwise.

Susan: And that brings us to the end of today's programme, in which we've reflected on the process of academic writing.
We've talked about the importance of focused research;
we've discussed techniques for making notes;
and we've spoken of the importance of acknowledging sources when you quote from the work of other authors.

This is just one of the stylistic conventions you'll have to follow as a member of the academic community.

ANNOUNCER:

Next time, we'll turn our attention to another aspect of student life: seminars and tutorials.