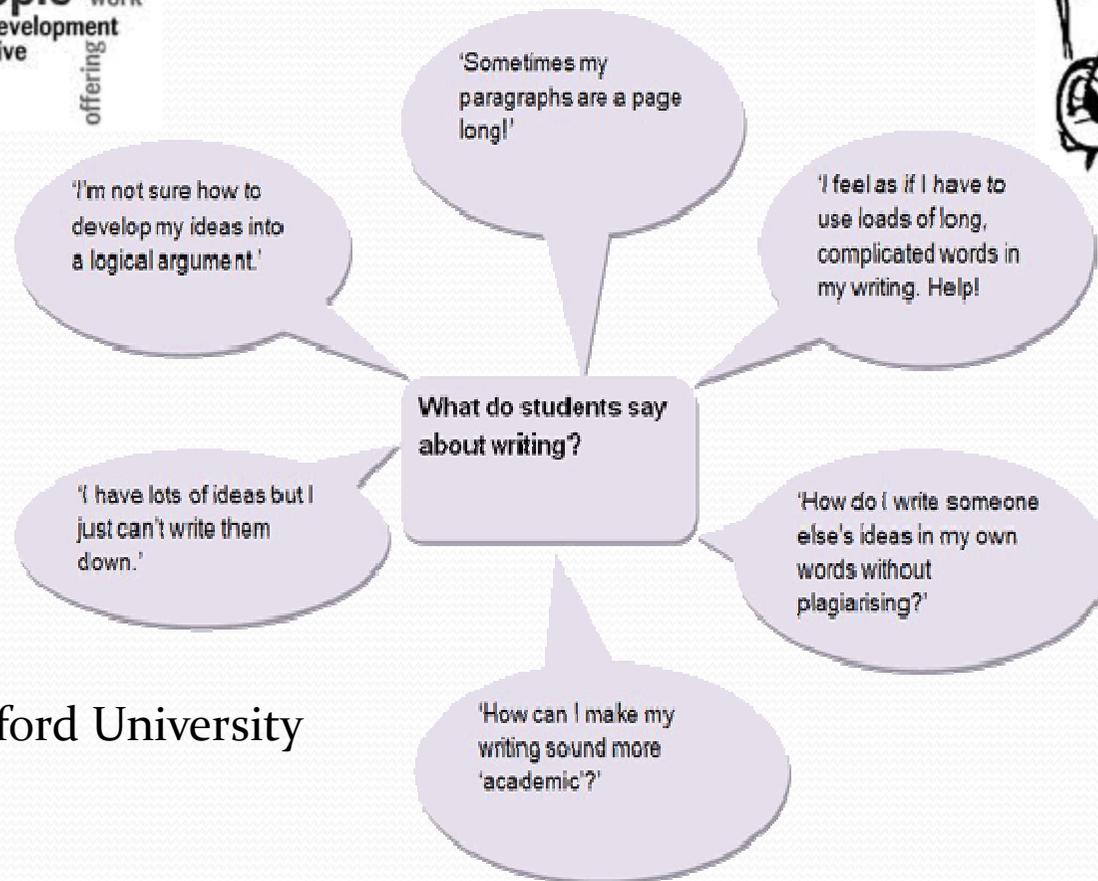


# Developing Students' Writing Skills

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# Writing



From: De Montford University



# Why do we need to develop writing skills?

Frequently employers complain about the report writing skills of young graduates. This is more common than comments on their technical skills. We need to ensure that our graduates meet the needs of industry and are well prepared for a professional career. The need for writing skills is acknowledged by the Institutions, especially in the professional review for Chartered status.

# Background to Student Education

- Many of us studied a classical language (Latin or Greek) during our secondary level education.

In my case I studied Greek. Hence at the age of 11, I was faced with:

*Αθηνα και Σπάρτα: γραφω: φουωσ: λογοσ*

Today at this age children learn “text language”

*“cu l8r”*

Consequently their spelling skills and grammar are less well developed. In addition, we have a number of students for whom English is a second language.

# Development of Grammar

Grammar was an important part of our education but this seems to be less so now for many schools. If I ask you what is the basic sentence construction I expect that you would answer:

“subject verb and object”

However the Greeks were more complex in that a sentence could have:

“verb and object”

If this was the case the *inferred* subject was the subject of the previous sentence.

# Development of Grammar

Thus we developed an understanding of grammar and spelling which has stayed with us. Today, many make very simple mistakes such as mixing up “**can**” & “**may**” so that a student will ask “I was ill for a couple of days so **can** I have an extension to a submission?” You might try to educate them by replying “You **may** have an extension”.

Another frequent mistake is to place “**only**” in the wrong place – I have had to correct official university documents which have included this mistake.



## How students gather information

Information is now commonly gathered from visual and audible sources. Journalists like to make reports seem dramatic by misusing words or concepts and this has influenced the younger generation.

As flooding is a particular interest of mine, I get annoyed when a reporter states that river A “broke its banks”.

A river never broke its banks throughout history!!



## Develop Writing Skills

For 25 years, education policy has followed a more or less consistent track, in which the main political parties share certain assumptions: for example, that standards can (*only* {Peter Wilby, *The Guardian* (sic.)}) be raised *only* by control from the centre; that schools and teachers need constant monitoring and testing; that competition is good for schools. But the latest horror story from the OECD – that standards of literacy and numeracy among our young adults are almost the lowest in the industrialised world and no better than those of their grandparents – we should be asking “is more of the same really the answer?”

# Develop Writing Skills

The UK scored poorly in a major study by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development on adult literacy, numeracy and other key skills. Although the UK (meaning England and Northern Ireland in the OECD's study) **scored below average** on literacy and numeracy, the study also measures whether people are using their skills in work – and there the UK fares much better.

**In literacy**, the UK was ranked 13<sup>th</sup>, ahead of Germany and the US in 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> respectively. But that was behind a top five of Japan, Finland, the Netherlands, Australia and Sweden.

**In numeracy**, the UK fared worse, in 16<sup>th</sup> place, although still outperforming the US in 21<sup>st</sup> place. The top five nations were Japan, Finland, Sweden, the Netherlands and Norway.



# Developing Writing Skills

The study also found that across all participating nations, adults with level 4 or 5 literacy (the highest levels) are three times as likely to enjoy high wages as those with level 1 literacy.

“Those with lower skills proficiency also tend to report poorer health, lower civic engagement and less trust,” the report says.

“What you know and what you do with what you know has a major impact on your life chances,” said Mr Schleicher, OECD deputy director for education.



# Developing Writing Skills

I would refer you to: “Government Digital Service Content style guide” Available at:

<https://www.gov.uk/designprinciples/styleguide>:

Always avoid metaphors. For example:

drive (you can only drive vehicles; not schemes or people)

drive out (unless it's cattle)

going forward (unlikely we are giving travel directions)

in order to (superfluous – don't use it)

one-stop shop (we are government, not a retail outlet)

ring fencing



## Developing Writing Skills

In my opinion it is not good to have a separate module on “Communications” or “Technical Writing”. Students tend to feel that we are insulting them and criticising their abilities.

Rather, I would recommend that it is embedded in the curriculum. An assignment which contributes to the mark of a module takes their attention and makes them apply themselves to the task as it is seen to be relevant and worthwhile.



## So how can we develop writing skills?

The first thing I would recommend is to make students read professional reports. If they are to develop their skills, we need to expose them to good writing. That enables them to benchmark their writing and gain an understanding of what is expected of them.

However, in my opinion that is not sufficient and we need to provide formative feedback on their writing.

# Formative feedback

Formative feedback should be formed of negative rather than positive comment.

You should avoid terms such as: “good” or “interesting” as these provide no indication on how the text can be improved.

I heard about a feedback given on a student paper (not in civil engineering) which simply stated “good” at every paragraph. This feedback was of no value to the student.

I recommend the “red pen” approach – be critical!!

# An EU student – first attempt

Climatic hazards have always existed but today with a ~~mondial~~ **the world population** over 7 billions and ~~a~~ increasing **urbanisation** ~~never seen~~, the consequence of any natural effect can be dramatic.

~~We (avoid using we, I, you etc.) can wonder if the~~ **The question can be asked whether the catatrophes catastrophes that we've seen along the** ~~which have occurred in recent times past decades~~ are the result ~~of a natural greater danger link to the~~ climatic change or ~~if by his~~ **developpment, human kind** (growth of the population, **and** urbanization...) ~~has increase the consequences of the natural events?~~

~~But p~~Paradoxically, when UK ~~must~~ faced **huge** flooding events (2007 ~~were~~ experienced the **greater greatest** flooding for 60 years), the country **has had** also to deal with drought issues linked to **surprising** a dry period. ~~But even if they are two serious matters, it~~ **It** is important to ~~notice~~ **note** that in terms of cost (human, but especially material and financial) flooding remains in the UK (as in France) more **dramatic costly**.

# An EU student – second attempt

Paradoxically, when UK faced flooding events (2007 experienced the greatest flooding for 60 years), the country has also to deal with drought issues linked to a dry period. But even if they are two serious matters, it is important to notice that in terms of cost (human but especially material and financial) flooding remains more costly (*Reference?*).

This type of disaster raises a question: Can they be avoided? The French flood prevention European centre states « Floods are natural phenomena that cannot be avoided. Some human activity and climatic changes contribute to increase the probability and negative effects.»<sup>3</sup>. The elements and the weather cannot be controlled but it is possible to avoid or at least reduce the consequences of climatic events.

# An EU student – final document

Climatic hazards have always existed but today with the world population over 7 billion and increasing urbanisation, the consequence of any natural effect can be dramatic.

The question can be asked whether the catastrophes which occurred in recent times are the result climatic change or growth of the population, urbanization.

The starting point of this review is the UK 2007 flooding which resulted in the Sir Michael Pitt report and the Government Response. During this event over 50.000 properties were flooded, around 7,000 people were rescued and 13 people died<sup>1</sup>. It was also the “largest loss of essential services since World War II, with almost half a million people without mains water or electricity. Transport networks failed, a dam breach was narrowly averted and emergency facilities were put out of action.”<sup>2</sup>.

# An home student – first attempt

“A flood is the inundation of a normally dry area caused by rising water in an existing waterway, such as a river or by the ponding of water at or near the point where the rain fell.” (Webmaster, 2010). The UKCP09 document produced by DEFRA to show the UK Climate Projections up until 2080 predicts a rise in ~~Winter~~ winter rainfall ~~by~~ of 33 mm (*everywhere across the UK?*) as a central estimate for a medium emission scenario which could lead to river, surface and sewer flooding. (Murphy, 2009)

Drought is a deficiency of precipitation from the expected or “normal” that, when extended over a season or longer period of time, is insufficient to meet demands. Thus drought is a relative, rather than absolute, condition. (Jarraud, 2006) The population of England and Wales is forecast to increase by 9.6 million people by the 2030s thus creating a larger demand for water. (Agency) (*what “agency”?*) This combination of factors (*what combination of factors?*) will lead to a higher prevalence of drought in the future.

## An home student – second attempt

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## Conclusion

Time and effort are required to develop reporting skills in students.

In the exercise detailed here, there were two opportunities given for critical feedback but most students availed themselves of three or four attempts. There were 79 students in the class and, given that it takes approximately fifteen minutes per student, this represents two normal working weeks used (within a 12 week period).

Midnight oil is likely to be needed!!

However, the results in seeing students develop provides the reward for the effort.