

Academic Essay Writing for Postgraduates

[Independent Study version]

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There are [Supplementary materials](#) in a separate file.

INTRODUCTION

Academic Essay Writing for Postgraduates is designed to help you plan, draft and revise the assignments you will be doing for your Master's degree at Edinburgh.

We focus on

- the *criteria* used to evaluate Master's-level writing
- the typical *components* of academic texts
- the way those components are *organised* in texts
- the English grammar and vocabulary used to *signal* these key elements

There are seven Units, each dealing with an important element of academic assignment work at postgraduate level. Look through the Contents page on the left and get an overall picture of what you will be covering in these materials.

In each Unit are a number of Tasks in which you are asked to think, analyse texts and write short answers. The best way to use these materials is with another student, with whom you can share ideas and argue. You will find our answers to the tasks - sometimes fact and sometimes opinion - in the *Answer Key and Study Notes* section that begin on page 43.

We very much hope you find the materials useful. We welcome suggestions for improvements (email address on page 41).

Acknowledgments

Some units include adapted or reused material from previous in-session and pre-session ELTC courses.

Our thanks go to Sylviane Granger and Stephanie Tyson and to Blackwell Publishers for permission to adapt their *World Englishes* paper for use in this course. (Full details of all cited sources are given in the *References*).

Unit 1 What is good academic writing?

As an international student at the University you probably have some concerns about your written English. However, the use of correct English is only one of the factors that academic staff consider when marking your work. The answer to the question 'What is good academic writing?' is **Writing that meets the expectations of the audience**. When you are doing a written assignment for a postgraduate degree, it is important to keep in mind the criteria that the readers will use in marking your work.

Task 1.1

Have you written any assignments yet for your degree course? If so, what sort of comments did you get from the readers/assessors?

Most Master's course organisers provide information, like that in the box below, about the criteria that will be used in marking your work.

Criteria of assessment

Project work takes many different forms which will be reflected in the way it is assessed. However, the following list summarises the eight main criteria used in evaluating written work:

1. evidence of adequate and appropriate background reading
2. a clear statement of aims and relevant selection of content
3. sensible planning and organization
4. evidence of systematic thought and argument
5. clarity of expression
6. careful presentation (e.g. accurate typing and proof-reading, helpful diagrams, etc.)
7. observation of conventions of academic discourse, including bibliographic information
8. observation of length requirements

Notice that only criterion 5 relates to **language**. Criteria 1-4 are to do with **content** and Criteria 6-8 involve issues of **presentation**.

Task 1.2

The five extracts below come from feedback given to British and international students on a project for the course whose criteria are shown on the previous page. Underline the positive words or phrases, and circle the negative ones.

CRITERIA*Example 1*

Balanced, well argued and well presented. The summary of advantages and disadvantages was succinct and comprehensive. We noted, however, a number of errors in the bibliography.

Example 2

You covered a great deal of ground, although at times you needed to add definitions of technical terms. In general, a solid piece of work, weakened by poor proof-reading, spelling, bibliographical omissions, odd spelling and punctuation. Closer attention to detail would have improved the whole impression.

Example 3

Comprehensive, partly because it was too long. What should have been the 'Introduction' occupied too much space and was out of balance with the rest. Extensive use of references, although it was not always clear that you understood all the issues discussed. You seem still to have serious self-expression problems in English.

Example 4

Superficial treatment - e.g. lack of discussion of underlying principles. Over-simple acceptance of terms used in the literature; insufficiently critical. You should have sought more guidance from your tutor.

Example 5

Your work is still hampered by difficulties of expression - many points where your argument needs clarifying. You tend to adopt others' terms without questioning them critically. A number of inconsistencies in your bibliography entries.

Task 1.3

Decide which criteria in the list on page 3 those comments match. Write in the appropriate number(s) on the right-hand side.

Task 1.4

Some of the markers' criticisms seem not to match the eight criteria. **What implicit criteria** do these markers seem to be using in evaluating their writing?

Making your point

In the process of persuading your readers to accept your argument, there are three main intellectual sources you can use:

- (1) logical reasoning
- (2) texts written by authoritative researchers in your field
- (3) data that you gather yourself

We will be discussing the use of all three sources in these materials.

In the case of the third source, different disciplines have different notions of **what is acceptable as data**:

- observations of yourself (introspection) or of other people
- opinions of people you have interviewed
- findings of other researchers
- results of your own practical experiments
- non-academic texts (e.g. law reports)
- professional experience and judgment

Task 1.5

Which of those are acceptable in your own field?

Logical argument

Language Box: Argument

To show **reasons**:

Because (of) / as / since /

Given (the fact) that...

In the light of (the fact) that...

As is shown / implied / suggested by...

Due to / owing to

To show **consequences and conclusions**

If... then...

Therefore / so / consequently

As a result / consequence

Hence / Thus (very formal; more common in sciences)

For this (these) reason(s), we can say that...

This leads / points to

This suggests / implies / indicates / shows / proves that...

From this we can see / conclude / deduce that...

It can be assumed / inferred / argued that...

Balance

One key element in a successful assignment is **balance**, in two senses: *physically*, it refers to the distribution of information in your text; and *intellectually*, there is an expectation that you will present both sides of an issue.

Balance in presentation

You need to decide roughly how much space (how many words) to allocate to the various sections of the assignment. Sometimes, the instructions make that clear; sometimes you have to interpret what the lecturer had in mind, as in this example, for an essay in Educational Management:

Outline the problems likely to arise from the introduction of larger lecture classes and discuss the possible solutions.

By using *outline* (meaning *summarise*), the lecturer showed she wanted her students to write more on the second aspect (*discuss*) of her question. Other words with a similar meaning to *outline* include *sketch*, *list* and the adverbs *briefly* or *in brief*.

If you are unsure about the expected balance in an assignment, ask for advice from the lecturer responsible for setting it. Otherwise you may discover too late that you have given too much space to one element and not enough to another.

Balance in argument

The second aspect of balance in academic writing is that you are expected to present an 'even-handed' argument. Making a strong logical case to persuade your reader to accept your point is really only half the picture. Effective argumentation also involves

- (1) anticipating possible objections to your reasons or evidence
- (2) showing that you have considered those objections,
- (3) using counter-arguments - the process known as *refutation*.

Task 1.6

The text below discusses a proposal to extend university library hours. Underline the arguments **in favour** of the change and those **against**. Which side does the writer finally come down on?

The Students' Union demand for a 24-hour library service has much to commend it. Recent increases in average class size have led to greater pressure on library resources, both in terms of study space available to students and of access to print materials. The parallel move in some courses towards more self-directed learning packages has also encouraged, or required, students to make greater use of recommended readings, including electronic sources. At the same time, a number of possible objections have been raised, in particular by the library staff: perhaps the most worrying is the strain on family life caused by increased or altered work hours, including 'unsocial' hours such as weekends. Another is the implications of the recent European directive on the 48-hour working week, which does not specifically exempt library (or academic) workers from the regulations. However, it should be feasible to devise and negotiate librarian working schedules that would bring Edinburgh into line with other British universities that have already adopted 24-hour opening.

Language Box: Counter-argument

Anticipating the counter-arguments

Opponents/Critics of this position (may, might, etc.) argue that...

Another argument against X is ...

It may be objected that..

One possible objection is that...

Several questions come to mind: ...

One might ask/wonder whether...

Certain objections must, of course, be considered: ...

Smythson (1995) has recently argued against...on the ground(s) that...

It is true that...

Refuting them

But..

On the other hand...

However,...

Nevertheless...

This is merely...

While this may be true in cases where..., it does not apply to...

... and to **strengthen a refutation** you can use 'surely':

*While this is valid for part-time staff, it **surely** does not apply in the case of full-time workers*

Task 1.7

Below is a student's discussion of card sorting, an experimental technique in psychology. How many counter-arguments does he mention? Does he then confirm that the technique is valid, or does he indicate that he accepts the counter-arguments?

The card-sorting technique

Psychologists have used sorting - also known as direct grouping - as one of several methods to investigate the mental lexicon. Typically, subjects are given a set of cards with words printed on them and are asked to sort them according to similarity of meaning into as many groups as they wish. The theory behind each experiment has depended on the preferences of the researcher. Miller (1969), for example, made the assumption that native speakers would sort nouns according to the semantic features they share, while ignoring their distinguishing features. However, feature theory is no longer as fashionable as it was when Miller wrote his paper. It has come under attack from various quarters... It has been criticised for its reductionist approach to meaning, which imposes an arbitrary structure in which there is no self-evident way of showing which senses are more important than others. There is also no theoretical limit to the number of features that can be identified... Nevertheless, it seems difficult to carry out any kind of contrastive lexical analysis without making use of some kind of semantic features.

adapted from Hill (1992: 68)

Before you read Unit 2

Later in these materials we will be referring to **Sample essays** on academic use of the Internet, written by an international student at Edinburgh.

Before you start Unit 2, read the first **sample essay**, which you will find on pages 22-25 of the *Supplementary Materials*, which are in a separate file.

We stress that it represents a *sample*, and *not a model* - in other words, it could be improved in a number of ways. Later we will be considering those improvements.

Unit 2 Writing the Introduction

Short essays

An essay introduction will often contain these elements:

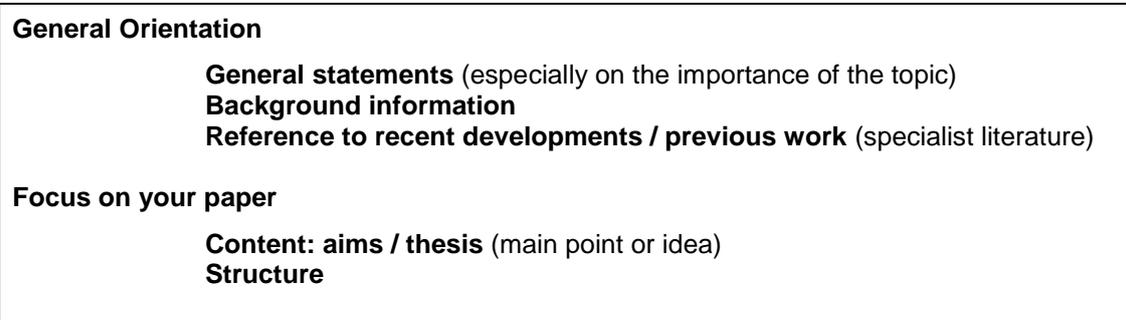


Figure 1. Model of an introduction to a (short) essay

General orientation

A common structure for the **General Orientation** element in an introduction is a combination of four elements *Situation – Problem – Solution – Evaluation*. They may appear in a different order, or they may not all be present. Look at the example below.

Cloning (the replication of an organism by the manipulation of a single cell) is no longer mere fantasy. The idea of human cloning is not new, but until recently it was a subject for fiction rather than science. That changed in 1997, when researchers at the Roslin Institute near Edinburgh cloned Dolly the sheep, the first animal cloned from an adult cell. But even Dolly's creator, Professor Ian Wilmut, has serious concerns about the apparent success of cloning technology. Most animal cloning experiments have resulted in unsuccessful implantation or abnormal foetuses. Of the animals that are born alive, many die of catastrophic organ failure. There is no reason to think that cloned human babies would not also suffer from these problems. However, Dr Panayiotis Zavos and Dr Severino Antonori claim that they have developed the technical skills to begin the greatest human experiment of our age and have announced that they will clone the first human within a year. Many people object to their intentions on ethical as well as medical grounds.

Task 2.1 Can you find all four SPSE elements in that text?

Task 2.2

Read the first page of the sample essay, and then work on the questions below:

- i. Where do you think the essay introduction ends?
- ii. Analyse which element of the model each sentence represents, and write in the letter next to it (**G** = General statements, **B** = Background, etc.)
- iii. Decide how the student could have improved the introduction, by omitting or adding sentences. (There are some language mistakes in the text, but don't worry about them yet – we will come back to that issue later).

Longer assignments

For a longer assignment, such as a project or MSc dissertation, the Introduction needs to be more substantial and more complex. One important feature of a project – and especially a dissertation – is that you may be expected not just to discuss work and ideas already in your field, but also to present the findings of your own research, whether that is based on reading, observation or experimentation. For that reason, the introduction needs to justify your contribution to the field.

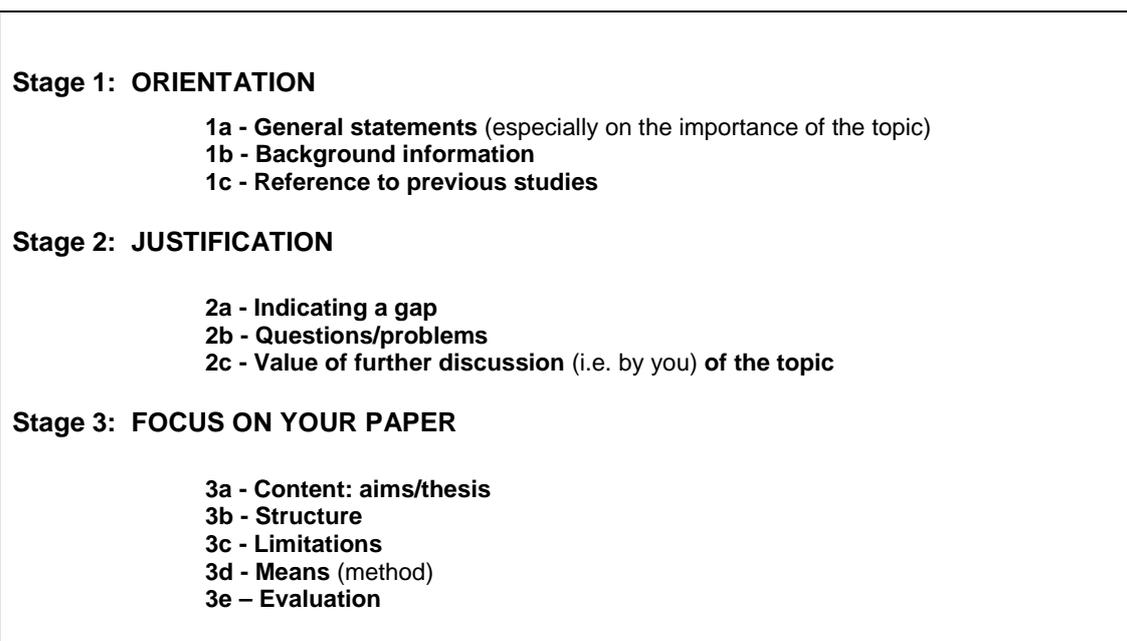


Figure 2. Stages of the Introduction to a project or dissertation

(adapted from Anderson 1993)

N.B. That is not a fixed model of how you must write your introduction; it shows the range of options you have when deciding what to include. In this session and the next we will be practising the language you can use in the different stages.

Language Box: Stage 1 - Orientation

1a - General statements

*Hunger striking **has a long ... history** in Ireland.*

*The sceptical paradox **is well known**...*

***There has been much interest recently in** the concept of ... and its relevance*

*Research and speculation on ... **have been growing at a rapid rate**...*

***In recent years** the study of ... **has focused on** ...*

1b - Background information

Stage 1b sometimes contains essential **facts** about the subject-matter which the reader has to know in order to understand the text - for example **definitions**, or other basic information.

1c - Reference to previous studies

***Halliday (1978) has developed** an elaborate framework to show that*

*There is now a **considerable body of research** which suggests*

***Most researchers** in the field agree that*

***Recent studies** have shown that*

***Much recent work** ... has indicated that ...*

***Jones (1978) found** ... that ..*

Stage 2: JUSTIFICATION

This is an important element in the Introduction, and is more substantial in projects and dissertations than in essays. We will come back to it in more detail in Unit 3.

Language Box: Stage 3 - Focus on your paper

3a - Content: aims / central idea

*My **primary purpose** is to...*

*I will **discuss** ... In ... I shall **argue** that*

*In this paper I will **claim**...*

*In this paper I **present results of a pilot study***

*The **aim** of this paper is to **demonstrate** that ...*

*This paper **investigates/describes** ...*

*The **object** of this paper is to **look critically at***

*This study **attempted to explore** ...*

3b - Structure

*This paper will **first** ..., and **then** ...*

***Having** analysed ..., I will go on to*

***First**, brief definitions of ... will be offered; **second**, ... the language data and the analysis will be presented; **third**, an attempt will be made...; **finally**, ...*

3c - Limitations

*Since ... is **beyond the scope of this study***

*It is **not the purpose of this study** to ..., **but rather** to ...*

*I will **not attempt** here to **Rather than focus** upon ..., my intention is*

*I **do not attempt** to describe or compare ... Instead, I **seek to** ...*

***Only** the data from ... **are considered** here*

3d - Means (method)

***My approach** is characterised by two assumptions*

*I have **based my study on***

***The data** on which the discussion is based **comprises***

*The present paper **uses** and **extends** those concepts and **is based on** ...*

3e - Evaluation

*... **offers a possible explanation for***

***This study offers new proposals** ...*

*There is some evidence to suggest that the... **should be widely applicable**, although the problem of ... **is likely to limit their use**.*

SUPPLEMENTARY TASKS

If you have time, here are two suggestions for further activities:

1. Do Study Task 2 in the *Supplementary Materials* (page 5). It involves comparing and improving different students' introductions to the same essay.
2. Study the language of the opening paragraph of the first sample Internet essay. Identify and correct the mistakes - you should be able to find some in every sentence.

Unit 3 Acknowledging your sources

An essential rule of the academic 'game' is that you should display **your knowledge of the field**, showing that you are aware of important sources relevant to your topic. In a postgraduate essay, you need both to read and report what has been written, and also to **evaluate** and **criticise** where appropriate. (We look at this area in more detail in Unit 4). For a postgraduate project including an empirical element (e.g. experiment, questionnaire or survey), you also need to locate your work within the framework of existing research.

In any assignment you must provide evidence for the argument you are making, by **citing** publications in the field. Citation includes **summarising** what you have read or **directly quoting** an appropriate extract from a source. Whether you summarise or quote, you must **acknowledge** the source, by providing the author's name and the publication details - both in your text and also in a list of References, or Bibliography, at the end of your assignment.

Why acknowledge?

One answer to that question is this: full acknowledgment is expected and required in all academic work - whether by students in coursework, or by academics (lecturers and researchers) in their publications.

Task 3.1

Read the University of Edinburgh advice (below) and check any unfamiliar words.

The process of referencing may seem rather complicated and arbitrary, if it is new to you, but it should begin to make more sense as you progress through your studies here. In order to assess your work and to give you useful feedback, your markers need to have a clear sense of what ideas you have developed for yourself and what comes from elsewhere. To be fair to all of the students on the course, it is important that each student is given grades that accurately reflect their own efforts. As you learn to produce work at a university standard, you are developing the skills that will allow you to participate within wider communities of scholars. In these communities, new knowledge and understanding is developed by building on the work of others.

By properly acknowledging earlier work, you give credit where it is due and help to maintain the integrity and credibility of academic research in this area. Clear referencing also allows readers to learn about the wider literature through your work. Understanding the ways in which particular scholars have contributed to the development of the literature makes it much easier to make sense of the current state of play.

However, in all subjects there are certain facts which are so well-known that it is not necessary to provide references for them in your work. This is what is known as the '**common knowledge**' of this subject area. At first it can be difficult to know what is and is not common knowledge and it is better to give references to a source if you are in doubt.

Adapted from <http://www.aaps.ed.ac.uk/regulations/Plagiarism/Intro.htm>

A different answer to the question "Why acknowledge?" is that, if you don't, you commit **plagiarism**. Below is some practical guidance for university students, adapted from Andy Gillett's University of Hertfordshire website

<http://www.uefap.co.uk/writing/writfram.htm>

Plagiarism is the representation of **another person's** work as **your own**. There are three main reasons why you should not do this.

1. **It is not helpful.**

If you plagiarise, you suggest that something is your work when it is not. This will not get you good marks. To do well in higher education, you need to be responsible for the ideas and facts that you use in your writing. You need to provide evidence for these ideas and facts. You need to show where they have come from and what they are based on. You do this by acknowledging the sources, by citing. This will support your arguments and help you succeed in your academic writing. It will also show your lecturers that you have read and understood the required texts.

2. **You need to come to your own conclusions.**

You need to show that you have understood the material and come to your own conclusions on the basis of what you have read and heard. Copying from textbooks, or pasting text from the Internet into your own writing, is not good enough. Most of what you write will come from the ideas of other people (from the textbooks you read, the lectures and the seminars you attend, and your discussions with other students, etc.). This is what academic study is all about. However, the purpose of an assignment is for you to say something for yourself using the ideas that you have studied, so you can present ideas you have learned in your own way. The emphasis should be on working with other people's ideas, not simply reproducing their words.

3. **It is against the regulations.**

You must not use another person's words or ideas as if they were your own. This is against university regulations and is considered a very serious offence. If you plagiarise, your lecturer cannot understand how well you understand the course and cannot therefore give you useful advice and support. In addition, if you plagiarise, you are not learning. This will become obvious in any written examination you are required to take.

You need to acknowledge the source of an idea unless it is common knowledge. It may be difficult to decide exactly what is common knowledge within your subject, but if your lecturer, in lectures or handouts, or your textbooks do not acknowledge the source, then you can assume that it is common knowledge within your subject. For ideas which are generally accepted as valid within your specialism, there is no need to provide a reference. Here are some tips on making sure you provide the necessary acknowledgments in an assignment:

- Take notes in your own words as far as possible. A good strategy is: read, put away your books and think, and then write your notes.
- If you do want to use a direct quotation, make clear (to yourself) in your own notes that it is an extract from the original text. Write down the reference details and page number. This will help you avoid accidental plagiarism when you copy from your own notes.
- When you use ideas of other people, follow the conventional system for citing and referencing their ideas at the relevant points in your assignment (inside your text and in the references). This will make it impossible for anyone to accuse you of cheating or stealing someone else's work. It will also help you to develop your research skills.

Practice in [Citing sources](#) and [Writing a Bibliography \(list of References\)](#) is available in *Supplementary Materials* - Study tasks 5, 6, 12 and 13.

Task 3.2 (adapted from one on the University of Hertfordshire website)

How many of these cases do you think would be regarded as plagiarism?

1. Changing some of the words and sentences in a text, but keeping the overall structure of the text and the vocabulary the same as in the original text.
2. Taking some short fixed phrases from several different sources and putting them together with some of your own words.
3. Copying a paragraph directly from the source with no changes.
4. Copying a paragraph making only small changes - for example, replacing some words with words with similar meanings.
5. Copying out an article from a journal, website or textbook, and submitting it as your assignment.
6. Cutting and pasting a paragraph: using the sentences of the original, but putting one or two in a different order, and leaving one or two out.
7. Paraphrasing a paragraph: rewriting the paragraph but changing the language, organisation and detail, and giving your own examples.
8. Quoting a paragraph by placing it in quotation marks and acknowledging the source.
9. Rewriting a passage from a source and presenting it as your own work.
10. Taking just one word or phrase from a text, because it is very well expressed.
11. Using another author's organisation and way of arguing.

Including references in your text

We will be using a short extract from an academic paper by Granger and Tyson (1996), which illustrates ways of referring to earlier publications in the Introduction section. The paper reported their study of differences between native and non-native university students' writing in English.

After analysing how the writers referred to previous research, we will focus on issues of language and presentation in citing others' texts in your own writing.

Task 3.3

Read the Introduction to Granger and Tyson's paper (on the next page). The underlined expressions have been highlighted for our purposes; they were not underlined in the original paper.

The use of connectors in English essays by native and non-native students

S. Granger and S. Tyson

Introduction

Over the last twenty years, interest in written English discourse - both the native speaker and learner varieties - has grown dramatically. In particular, following the publication of Halliday and Hasan's *Cohesion in English* (1976), attention has focused on cohesion in texts. The aim of many of these studies, particularly those conducted in the USA in the early 1980s, was to discover the possible relationship between the use of cohesion links and coherence, and the level of writing proficiency. On the whole, no such correlation has been found. For Tierney and Mosental, for example, cohesion was pervasive in all the texts they studied but was 'causally unrelated to coherence' (1983; 225). Neuner (1987) found no statistical difference in the number of individual connectors used in good and poor essays by US students.

Although quantitative analysis can be helpful - Pritchard (1981), for example, found a higher incidence of connectors in 'problem passages' of students' essays - it is important to consider qualitatively how these connectors are used. As Hartnett (1986: 143) concludes, 'Using cohesive ties successfully is apparently not easy. Both good and poor writers may use the same kinds of connectors, but they use them differently'. When studying the writing of non-native learners in particular, it is therefore necessary to combine a quantitative and a qualitative approach, comparing frequency with type of use.

Another problem with many studies is that they are very small-scale. Connor's (1984) study, for example, was based on six essays. There is a pressing need for large-scale studies in order to obtain a more accurate description of cohesion/coherence problems in English learners' writing. This need for empirical data formed the rationale behind the International Corpus of Learner English (ICLE) project (see Granger 1993).

..... (the Introduction ends here).....

References

- Connor, Ulla. 1984. A study of cohesion and coherence in English as a second language students' writing. *Papers in Linguistics* 17/3: 35-57.
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- Pritchard, R.J. 1981. A study of the cohesion devices in the good and poor compositions of eleventh graders. Ph.D. dissertation, University of Missouri-Columbia.
- Tierney, R and Mosental, J. 1983. Cohesion and textual coherence. *Research in the Teaching of English* 17: 215-29.

Task 3.4

Look again at the underlined verbs. Which tenses have the authors used - and why?

The way you construct Stage 1c and Stages 2a-c of the Introduction is particularly important in demonstrating your awareness of previous research. Here are those stages again:

STAGE 1: ORIENTATION

1c - Reference to previous studies

STAGE 2: JUSTIFICATION

2a - Indicating a gap

2b - Questions/problems

2c - Value of further discussion (i.e. by you) of the topic

It is in these stages that you show the connection between what you have read and what you are going to write, so you need to make clear to the reader not merely what work has already been done, but also how your own work builds on that.

Stage 1c: Choosing the right reporting verb

English offers a wide range of ‘reporting’ verbs, but which one you choose affects how your reader interprets what you mean. When reporting previous work, you can *accept* it and extend it into new areas; alternatively, you may want to *question* or *reject* what others have claimed or argued, and propose alternative ideas.

You have to be careful to choose a verb that reflects the appropriate **degree of certainty**, either of the original or secondary author (you), about what was reported or claimed. For example, using the verb *claim* suggests you want to distance yourself from the writer's statement, so your reader will expect a criticism to follow:

Task 3.5

Below are some common reporting verbs, arranged to show what they imply about your attitude to what you are reporting. Can you think of any others/ If so, add them in, under the appropriate heading.

doubtful

claim
speculate
hold
assume
assert

neutral

comment
suggest
argue
discuss
report
note

certain

state
show
deny
refute
point out

For detailed advice on ways of reporting in English, have a look at this University of Toronto website: <http://www.utoronto.ca/writing/reporting.html>

STAGE 2: JUSTIFICATION

In a project or dissertation, you need to persuade the reader that your contribution to the field is necessary. Three common strategies are to:

- indicate a *gap* or *deficiency* in what has been done so far
- say that certain *questions* or *problems* remain to be resolved
- stress the benefit or value of *further attention* to the topic

Language Box: Justification

Stage 2a - Indicating a gap

*Surprisingly, **only one** extensive article has been published.*

*This aspect of ... **has not been given much attention.***

*The **limitation** of all these interpretations is that...*

*Studies of ... are **rare***

Negative expressions (*few, little, not much, hardly, etc.*) are very common here.

*the literature on ... **has concentrated principally on ...***

Most of the data** on ... which can be found in the literature **pertain to ...

***Most existing research** on ... **has been based on relatively small samples ...**
*which **has made it impossible** to carry out satisfactory studies**

Stage 2b - Indicating questions/problems

Either direct or indirect questions:

***Would** an analysis of ... bear out their claims?*

*...requires clarification. **Is it ..., or is it ...?***

*But **the question remains whether ...***

Stage 2c - Importance of the topic

Highlight the positive value or advantage of the topic:

*His elegant model **merits testing** as a macrosociological theory. ..*

*The article **well deserves careful analysis...***

Task 3.6

Look back to the Introduction to Granger and Tyson's paper. Underline the expressions they used to justify their own contribution.

SUPPLEMENTARY TASKS

Study Tasks 5, 6, 7 or 8 (pages 10–13 of the *Supplementary Materials*) address some of the issues we have covered in this unit.

Unit 4 Critical use of source materials

Lecturers here often say that students – both British and international – are not critical enough in the way they read and use source texts. You are expected not simply to accept and repeat what you have read, but to make clear how valid you think it is in general, and how relevant it is to your own topic. Being prepared to **question** and, if necessary, **reject** what you have read is regarded in British universities as a sign of a good student.

Cultural assumptions such as this are particularly problematic, because they are normally **implicit**:

Academic culture and cultures of learning

In one sense, culture is taken for granted. It involves assumptions, ideas and beliefs which are often not articulated, and members of a culture may not be explicitly aware of such assumptions. Culture is a pattern of normal ways of doing things, what people expect and how people interpret situations in which their expectations are not met. Academic culture, then, refers to this taken-for-granted system for carrying out academic matters. It involves patterns of expectations which are rarely made explicit, but which operate at a deep level and affect people's behaviour, values, thinking, attitudes and beliefs.

Jin and Cortazzi (1996: 206)

When lecturers set assignments beginning ‘*Discuss*’, ‘*Comment on...*’, ‘*Assess...*’, they are in fact inviting you to be critical. The problem is that they may assume that all students will realise this. We saw in Unit 1 that two of the feedback comments showed that the markers had expected the students to be critical, even though that was not one of the criteria listed in their Course Manual.

Task 4.1

The extract below illustrates the sort of assumption that Jin and Cortazzi were referring to. It was feedback from an Edinburgh academic on a student’s first draft. He used the expression ‘critical understanding’ in two places. What do you think he meant?

In general [these sections] do not reflect adequate critical understanding of the theoretical issues you discuss, nor do you show clearly enough what literature is relevant, and how, to your particular research topic. At present, the draft gives the impression that you feel obliged to summarise everything you have read just in case it is relevant; you need to prune this material drastically, and you need to reduce the number of quotations and to increase the amount of space devoted to your own critical understanding of the issues discussed in relation to what you are setting out to show... Your line of argument and the steps that you follow in pursuing that line need to be made much clearer; you need to impose a much more transparent structure on your discussion.

The critical review

On some postgraduate courses the need to show critical understanding takes a more specific form: the *critical review*. Below are the instructions for two past review assignments for Edinburgh MSc courses:

Task 4.2

Compare the two sets of instructions from past assignments. What elements are common to both? In what ways do they differ?

MSc in Public Health Sciences: Assessing Economic Evaluations in Health Care

It has been suggested that economic evaluations can improve the process of allocating scarce resources in health care. Many decisions makers in the health arena, however, remain sceptical. The paper (title...) has landed in your in-tray, with a note asking for rapid and concise report (1500 words).

Your report should contain three sections. The first should summarise the report in no more than 250 words. This should be followed by your assessment of the methods employed in the paper. Finally you should recommend which – if any – of the programmes evaluated in the paper should receive public funding.

M.Sc. in Computer Science: Assessed Exercise

Aim

This exercise is intended to encourage you to read in more detail on a topic related to the material presented in lectures. You will also gain experience in following up academic references and in thinking critically about content and presentation of papers.

Requirements

You should select a topic from the list and carry out a survey of papers (at least 3 but no more than 10) related to it, starting with the reference(s) provided. You should then submit a written report on your topic including:

- an introductory description of the topic;*
- a summary of the main articles you found;*
- a criticism of the content and presentation of the articles.*

You will find that the quality of articles varies greatly, so give credit for clear explanation and complain when this is lacking. Think about whether the subject matter is put properly into context and whether the reference list is helpful.... As a rough guide, a typical report might be of around 3000 words (excluding references). However, quality rather than quantity is of the essence, so say what you want to say clearly and concisely. The report should include a properly constructed reference list.

Language Box: Negative evaluation

This study would have been (better) if it had (included) [X]

Neither [X] nor [Y] was considered / addressed (in sufficient depth)

The authors omitted to mention / did not explain how...

It is not clear how [X] was established / measured / identified

There is no / inadequate explanation of [X]

Little attention has been paid to [X]

My reservations are to do with the argument that [X]

My doubts concern [X]

One unsatisfactory aspect of the study is [X]

It is/remains doubtful / a matter for debate whether...

There are grounds for serious doubts as to whether [X]

It is arguable whether...

At first sight this appears reasonable, but on further reflection...

This has little / nothing to do with [X]

[X] is not relevant / seems irrelevant / has no obvious relevance to..

Their conclusion seems out of place / unfounded

Task 4.3

Can you think of other expressions with similar meanings? Put them in the spaces.

Balance in evaluation

Writing a critical review does not require you simply to be negative. You should also make positive comments, such as those in the Language Box, where you think they are deserved.

Language Box: Positive evaluation

This study has a direct bearing on... [Y]

This study is directly relevant to... [Y]

[X] is central to / suitable for / an important element in... [Y]

[X] plays a key / crucial / pivotal role in...

The authors make a forceful / strong / cogent case for/against... [X]

Their argument is clear / persuasive / succinct / effective

Task 4.4

Below is the 'skeleton' of an MSc student's review of a book on teaching foreign language listening. What you see is the basic structure of his argument. As you read it, underline the words that express negative views, and circle the positive expressions. (Do nothing to the ones that *neutrally* report the authors' work).

The main thrust of the authors' argument is to discredit the 'bottom-up' model as an adequate description of competent listening. In doing this, however, they tend to undervalue the crucial importance of ... They seem to assume that ... They claim that "teaching programmes should not..." (1988: 42). It is regrettable that they give no definition of ... Moreover, it is worth noting that in their own proposed listening programme they make no mention of any sort of...

The aim of many of their listening activities is to... They attempt to get listeners to become aware of ... They thus focus on ... This is an admirable break with traditional listening practice, which involves... The authors are also to be commended for offering clear criteria for... (although little, unfortunately, is said about...) and for devising a useful and challenging means of ...

To conclude this critical examination, I believe that the emphasis on higher-level processes in the book is entirely suitable for learners who ... However, I believe that it would be less suitable for beginners because...

Adapted from Leader (1992:12-16)

Evaluating sources on the Internet

Particular problems now arise from the availability of so much information on the Internet. The Net is an excellent resource, but it has to be used carefully and, above all, critically. On-line research requires additional skills to those needed for traditional library research using printed materials.

The main difference is that books and articles in a library have been carefully evaluated by experts before they were accepted for publication. This process, called **peer review**, makes an article on cloning in *Time* magazine quite different from one in the *Journal of Biomedical Ethics*. Secondly, when books and other materials come into the University library system, they are systematically catalogued and cross-referenced using standard procedures, followed by research libraries all over the world. This process is the basis for the way materials are organized in the Library, and it makes possible the various search functions of university Web catalogues.

But with the Internet, anyone can put anything they like onto a website, without review or evaluation. This means that students need to take particular care when doing research on-line (unless you are using one of the official academic resources on the Net, such as on-line academic journals, and official university and scientific sites).

Task 4.5

The next section is advice from a University of Toronto website on reading Net sources critically. Read it and check any expressions you are unsure of.

Criteria for evaluating specific sources on the Net

If you ask yourself these questions when looking at a Web site, you can avoid many errors and problems.

Authority

- Who is the author?
- Is the author's name given?
- Are her qualifications specified?
- Is there a link to information about her and her position?
- Have you heard of her elsewhere (in class, or cited in your reading)?
- Has the author written elsewhere on this topic?

Affiliation

- Who is the sponsor of the Web site?
- Is the author affiliated with a reputable institution or organization?
- Does the text reflect the views of the organization, or only of the author?

Notes:

*If the sponsoring institution or organization is not clearly identified on the site, check the URL. Academic websites will have **edu** (in North America and Australia) or **ac** (in the UK). Government sites are identified by the extension **.gov**.*

*URLs containing **.org** are less straightforward, and require careful research: these are sites sponsored by non-profit organizations, some of which are reliable sources and some of which are very biased.*

*Sites with the **.com** extension should also be used with caution, because they have commercial or corporate sponsors who probably want to sell you something.*

Audience Level

What audience is the Web site designed for? You want information at the college or research level. Don't use sites intended for school students or sites that are too technical for your needs.

Currency

Is the Web site current, or out of date?

Is the date of the most recent update given? (Generally speaking, Internet resources should be up-to-date; after all, getting the most current information is the main reason for using the Net for research in the first place).

Are all the links up-to-date and working? (Broken links may mean the site is out-of-date; they're certainly a sign that it's not well-maintained).

Content Reliability/Accuracy

Is the material on the Web site reliable and accurate?

Is the information factual, not opinion?

Can you verify the information in print sources?

Is the source of the information clearly stated - whether it is original research material or secondary material borrowed from elsewhere?

How valid is the research that is the source?

Does the material as presented have substance and depth?

Are any arguments given based on strong evidence and good logic?

Is the author's point of view impartial and objective?

Is the author's language free of emotion and bias?

Is the site free of errors in spelling or grammar and other signs of carelessness in its presentation of the material?

Are additional electronic and print sources provided to complement or support the material on the Web site?

If you can answer all these questions positively when looking at a particular site, then you can be pretty sure it's a good one; if not, it's probably a site to avoid.

The key to the whole process is to think critically about what you find on the Net; if you want to use it, you are responsible for ensuring that it is reliable and accurate.

Source: <http://www.erin.utoronto.ca/library/utml/common/services/researchinternet.html>

The University of Edinburgh library service provides on effective searching and use of electronic source materials:

<http://www.lib.ed.ac.uk/howto/#internet>

Try it out and see which resources there can help you as you are working on written assignments.

Summary

In this unit we have seen that postgraduates are expected to read (and write) critically. But your criticisms cannot be vague; they have to be justified in relation to your particular purpose.

The importance of relating what you have read to the topic of your assignment was stressed by the Edinburgh academic whose comments we read at the start of this unit:

... you need to reduce the number of quotations and to increase the amount of space devoted to your own critical understanding of the issues discussed in relation to what you are setting out to show.

Using the Net as a research resource has obvious advantages in terms of speed and quantity, but these have to be balanced against the risk of using unreliable information - and, of course, the risk of plagiarism, which we looked at last week.

So being a critical reader is even more important now than it used to be.

SUPPLEMENTARY TASK

Read Supplement 9, 'Criticism in academic cultures'. If possible, show it to another student and discuss your responses. Alternatively, write up your own response.

Compare your responses with the answer to Study Task 10

Unit 5

Expressing caution

One feature that makes academic writing different from other forms of communication is the need to take care over the degree of certainty or uncertainty you express. This applies particularly when you are making claims on the basis of what you have read in the sources you are citing, and when you are interpreting research findings. In discussion we may make stronger, more definite statements without being challenged, but in academic writing, we have to adjust the strength of claim to match the evidence we have cited. This expression of academic caution is known as **hedging**.

Various words are used to describe this feature of academic language. We talk about hedged claims being ‘tentative’, ‘limited’, ‘moderate’ or ‘modest’. On the other hand, claims that are stronger than is justified by the evidence are said to be ‘overstated’, ‘exaggerated’, or ‘immoderate’. Cases where a writer has provided no support at all would be criticised as ‘unfounded’ or ‘unwarranted’ claims.

One way of being cautious is to choose an appropriate **modal verb**. But these are only one set of a range of words used to express caution, such as those below:

Language Box: Expressing caution

Modal verbs *must / should / may / might / could (have... ..ed)*

Full verbs *appear to / seem to (have... ..ed)*
 suggest
 point to

Adverbs *apparently / perhaps / possibly / potentially*
 relatively / comparatively
 arguably

Nouns *possibility*
 potential
 (on the) evidence (available)

Adjectives *possible / potential / plausible / probable / likely / not impossible*
 reasonable to assume

Caution in interpreting others' research

In most academic fields, postgraduates are asked to *interpret* findings of published work. You need to choose words carefully, in order to express the appropriate degree of caution in your interpretation.

Task 5.1

The extract below comes from a study investigating how British students who speak Spanish as a second language (L2) are influenced as they learn Portuguese as a third language (L3). Underline the definite expressions and circle the cautious ones.

One point about which there is wide agreement in the literature is that transfer (both positive and negative) is more likely to take place from a language which is similar to the new foreign language being learnt, than from a language which is unrelated. There is some evidence that this can lead to more transfer taking place from the L2 than from the mother tongue, where the L2 is perceived as closer to the new language being learnt. This phenomenon has been found in all areas of language, and with specific reference to Spanish and Portuguese. Clearly, Spanish and Portuguese are closer to each other (both historically and typologically) than they are to English, and it seems to be the case that learners' perceptions of similarities between languages generally correspond to their actual relatedness. Hensey (1967) analysed the errors of learners of Portuguese (both Spanish L1 and Spanish L2) and found what appeared to be Spanish-based transfer errors in vocabulary, grammar and pronunciation.

Similarity is not the only cause for L2/L3 influence proposed in the literature. Bentahila (1975) and Rivers (1979) suggest recency as a possible factor: whichever foreign language was learnt most recently will influence the next language learnt. Meisel speculates that the way in which foreign languages are stored and processed in the brain may be different from the way in which the L1 is dealt with, and that this could lead to L2/L3 influence.

(Based on Benson, 1990: 124)

Task 5.2

Is the student (Benson) expressing her own opinion of the research findings, or is she reporting the caution of the original authors?

Caution in interpreting your own findings

If an assignment requires you to report and analyse the results or data from your own research, it is important that you choose the appropriate level of certainty when interpreting what you have found.

Task 5.3

This comes from a recent research paper in which the authors reported the findings of a survey on **attitudes to learning English** in two groups of students in Edinburgh - one from Hong Kong and the other from Japan. Underline the words (full verbs, modal verbs, adjectives, etc.) used to moderate or strengthen the interpretation.

Discussion

When we compare the comments of the two groups, it is clear that the similarities are far greater than the differences, apart from their views on whether or not they wanted to sound like native speakers or aimed for 'international intelligibility' - in other words, wanted to be easily understood but to keep their own accent in English. Most of the Hiroshima group aspired to native-like pronunciation, rather than accented international intelligibility. On the other hand, the Hong Kong students' opinions were more evenly divided: half the group (10) wanted native-like pronunciation, with most of the others (8) aiming for international intelligibility.

The comparatively high number of Hong Kong students who aimed for international intelligibility may reflect to some extent the much higher profile of English in Hong Kong than in Japan - not to mention the fact that Hong Kong English is a recognised regional variety of English. In this sense, aiming for intelligibility may be a belief based on first-hand experience of Hong Kong English or, possibly, a desire for group solidarity.

The overwhelming majority in both the Japanese and Hong Kong groups declared themselves 'very willing' to change their intonation, including those individuals who found English intonation 'strange' or 'different'. It could be that the fact that the two groups had relatively proficient English was also a slight influence on their views.

(adapted from Davies, Gollin and Lynch, 2005: 30-31)

Task 5.4

Below are two paragraphs from the sample Internet essay that we asked to read at the end of Unit 2. (The whole essay is on pages 22-25 of your *Supplementary Materials*).

In some places the student has not been cautious enough in making points and claims about Internet use. For example, a sentence such as “*Everyone has access to the Internet at home*” would clearly be an exaggeration.

Look for points that you think are not cautious enough (e.g. overgeneralisations) or too cautious. Decide how to make them more, or less, cautious. Edit the text at those points to include your changes.

First of all, the Internet is always a good place to get started. Writing an essay is often a painstaking task and sometimes you will even get stuck in choosing an appropriate topic. If it is really a problem, using a search engine by typing in several simple keywords about the topics in mind will give you some rough pictures. It is rather like a “brainstorm” that you will find thousands of opinions and ideas for a single topic, which may reflect how “hot” the topic is, how many people have similar idea with you and how much resources on Web you can make use of. Through comparison, you will find how valuable a topic is or is not.

When a topic is selected, the next step is to seek professional help and turn to electronic resources such as e-journals and e-periodicals for reference. Reading on computer perhaps not quite comfortable, but as a tradeoff, you can make marks on these e-books while doing this will never be permissible on print in the library. Moreover, as more and more researchers begin to use Internet resources, you will find a lot of articles on journals and periodicals have Internet hyperlinks as reference in their bibliographic, those you can turn to by just mouse clicks. To make the full use of the Internet, you can also exchange ideas with the author or ask questions via email. In a word, the Internet provides everything you need in reading, not only the reading materials, but also other convenience like the search engines, electronic dictionaries, communication tools and quick access towards other materials.

Caution in interpreting data

If you are not used to discussing statistical data, you may find this advice helpful:

KEY POINTS

- Take your time and don't jump to conclusions.
- Look fairly quickly at the main headings of the table. Then pick on one or two numbers and check what they seem to be telling you. Does the table 'make sense'?
- Go back to the words round the edges of the table and at the heads of columns and read them carefully, to be sure you know what you are looking at.
- Read any footnotes.
- Scan for any interesting data - horizontally along the rows and vertically up and down the columns. Check for:

high and low points	trends	blips
----------------------------	---------------	--------------
- Summarize for yourself the main conclusions you think can be drawn.

(Based on Northedge, 1990: 98)

Task 5.5

The table below shows the percentage of Welsh speakers in Wales over a 60-year period. Decide what conclusions you can draw about life and education in Wales, on the basis of this evidence. Use Northedge's guidelines and the Language Boxes to help you express the right level of caution.

Write out your interpretations as full sentences.

Wales: Percentage of population speaking Welsh - all regions, by age

AGE	1941	1961	1981	2001
All ages	36.8	28.9	20.8	19.7
3-4 years	22.1	14.5	11.3	14.7
5-9 years	26.6	20.1	14.5	19.3
10-14 years	30.4	22.2	17.0	20.3
15-24 years	33.4	22.8	15.9	14.6
25-44 years	37.4	27.4	18.3	15.1
45-64 years	44.1	35.4	24.8	19.4
65 years and over	49.9	40.7	31.0	26.4

SUPPLEMENTARY TASK

If you have time, look at Supplement 10, 'Interpreting Data' in the *Supplementary Materials* (page 16), which presents some data on TEAM results.

Do Study Task 11 – discussing the questions with someone else first, if possible – and then draft a paragraph interpreting what the data shows.

Unit 6

Writing the Conclusion

In Unit 1 we considered the features of ‘good’ academic writing at master’s level. One of the implicit criteria used by markers was **coverage**. ‘Covering’ a topic means giving it *comprehensive* treatment. It is achieved through the whole piece of work, but the place where you can highlight the ground you have covered is the **Conclusion**. There you have the opportunity to leave your reader with the final impression that your text is coherent, complete and competent.

Task 6.1

Below are the conclusions from the two transport essays in section 1 of the Supplementary Materials. The title was: ‘*It has been pointed out that road transport policies in the developing world help the rich at the expense of the poor. How far is this also true in developed countries?*’.

Which is the better conclusion to an essay on that topic - and why?

Essay 1

To sum up, it is the poorest communities that suffer most, in various ways, from policies that encourage road building. This is as true in developed countries as in the developing. I believe it is important that governments should take account of the needs of less well-off citizens, by adopting transport policies that restrict - rather than extend - the use of the private car. As things are, the minority benefits from road transport development at the expense of the majority.

Essay 2

It can be seen, then, that road building mostly directly benefits the rich in the Third World, while it is the poor that pay the costs. With this in mind, it seems that "the construction of motorways is a modern parable, using public funds to make life easier for the rich and harder for the poor" (Eher 1995: 171). These policies carry a serious risk: the differences in effect on the better-off and worse-off in a developing economy could become a cause of dispute and conflict. It is vital that the interests of the majority are not ignored.

What to include in the conclusion to an essay

Study this advice from an Edinburgh MSc course handbook:

Conclusion – has two requirements:

i. summarise your argument. This is your opportunity to draw together the threads of your argument and tell the reader what conclusions they should take away from your treatment of the literature. Don't simply tell us that you looked at **x**, **y** and **z** topics. Never introduce new substantive material in a conclusion.

ii. reflect on the implications of your case, returning explicitly to the aims of your paper and the reasons for your interest in the theme. At this stage you are allowed to 'take off the blinkers' and comment on related but wider themes – be they practical or theoretical. Where appropriate you may finish a paper by pointing to areas which, on the basis of your paper, warrant *future research*.

(MSc in International Business and Emerging Markets handbook, page 28)

Task 6.2

Some words or expressions in that extract may be unfamiliar - e.g. 'take off the blinkers', and 'warrant'. Check their meaning.

Task 6.3

Below is the conclusion from the sample Internet essay that you looked at earlier. Compare it with the advice in the MSc Handbook. Can you suggest ways of improving it? Use the space below the box to draft your improvements.

The essay was intended to discuss how beneficial the Internet is for students on master's degree programme by weighing the advantages and disadvantages of using Internet resources. Although I quite agree that Internet resources have advantages on selecting topics, referring to electronic materials, collecting data and developing academic interest, I have to admit that inefficiency in looking for resources, difficulty in evaluation resources and inappropriate use of resources would turn the whole thing upside down. In the essay, cases from self-experiences are included, as to give some indications on an efficient and proper use of Internet resources. However, fewer new ideas are given on discussing the disadvantages especially on plagiarism due to limited study on this aspect. Last but not least, the Internet is just a format of resource. There is no right or wrong with the resource, but it matters how you do with the resource. Using properly, there will be a lot of convenience for our research and study.

What to include in the conclusion to a project

(Here, 'project' means an academic assignment based on some sort of empirical data - from an experiment, survey, questionnaire, etc. It would include both a piece of course work and also 'summer' dissertation) .

A project conclusion has two main functions: it should **refer back** to what you have written, reminding the reader of your argument, and giving some sort of evaluation and/or interpretation; and it should **point forward** to what you think might happen in the future, with suggestions or recommendations, or predictions or warnings. In their analysis of Conclusion sections of empirical papers, Weissberg and Buker (1990) suggest there may be up to six elements:

- A. **Restatement of purpose** (or hypothesis)
- B. **Summary** of main points / findings; whether they support the hypothesis; whether they agree with other researchers' findings
- C. Possible **explanations** for the findings; and/or **speculations** about them
- D. **Limitations** of the study
- E. **Implications** (generalisations from the findings)
- F. **Recommendations** for future research and **practical applications**

Task 6.4

Which of those six elements were not included in the MSc Handbook advice on essay conclusions (top of page 33)?

Task 6.5

Below is the conclusion from a study of the relationship between a person's height and their success in learning English. Decide which of the six elements each sentence represents.

Conclusion

¹The aim of this study was to see whether a person's height can positively influence their ability to learn a foreign language - in this case, English. ²We have presented evidence that there is indeed a positive correlation between height and language proficiency. ³Learners of English between 1.8 and 2.0 metres in height achieved higher overall IELTS scores than learners less than 1.8 metres tall. ⁴It has to be acknowledged that our sample was small, and was limited to 30 middle-aged Dutch lecturers in English literature and 30 French primary school pupils. ⁵However, if our findings are supported by research into a wider range of English learners, it might be advisable to give young children physical stretching exercises before they begin to learn a foreign language. ⁶Whether the same positive effects can be achieved by encouraging children to wear shoes with higher heels remains to be investigated.

Language Boxes: the Conclusion

Restatement of purpose

The aim / purpose / objective of this study was to...
This study was intended / designed to...
Among the aims of this study was the (investigation) of...
Our research investigated / examined / explored whether...

Summary of findings

The results showed /were that...
We found that... (X) increased / decreased significantly when..
We found that the majority of British parents are in favour of....
The findings (do not) support the hypothesis that...
These findings are (in)consistent with previous research
The findings run contrary to the conventional view that...

Possible explanations and speculation

It may be that the findings were affected / influenced by...
(X) may be due to...
It could be that...
If these results are confirmed by other studies, we may have to...

Limitations

We need to be cautious about these findings, because...
... there was no control group
... the study was based on a limited number of ...
... the survey was conducted only among inexperienced lawyers
It has to be emphasised / acknowledged that the study was exploratory

Implications

The present study offers clear evidence for
The study supports the view / claim that...
There is therefore some evidence that...
This leads us to believe that...
This suggests that (X) may be an important (factor) in (Y)
Our research investigated / examined / explored whether...

Recommendations

Likely areas for further research / work are...
Future research should focus on...
One avenue for further study would be to...
Future investigation will no doubt reveal whether...
Further research is needed into...
It is important / relevant to investigate (whether)...

SUPPLEMENTARY TASK

If your Master's course assignments will involve drawing conclusions from empirical research findings, you should find it helpful to do Study Task 12 (Supplement 11).

Unit 7 Revising your text: Redrafting, editing and proof-reading

Redrafting means making large-scale changes to the draft. *Editing* involves smaller 'local' changes and improvements. *Proof-reading* is correcting slips and inconsistencies.

When revising your work, the key word is clarity, in relation to three overall aspects of your text:

- argument
- use of language
- presentation.

Checklist for Revising

The introduction

- Have you explained the importance of the topic?
- Have you provided background information?
- Does the introduction make clear the structure of the essay?
- Is it clearly separated from other sections?
- Is it concise?

The argument

- Have you included all the key points?
- Is your sequence of points clear and logical?
- Have you considered possible counter-arguments?
- Is the relationship between the points clear?

The evidence

- What sort of evidence have you used? (Text, statistics, graphical data)
- Have you shown how the evidence is relevant to your argument?
- Have you clearly separated others' reported views and your own views?
- Have you evaluated the strength of the evidence?
- Do you make any claims? Are they justified?
- Have you acknowledged all your sources?
- Have you integrated direct quotations into your own text?

The conclusion

- Does it summarise the ground covered?
- Does it explain your final position on the question?
- Does your final sentence provide a strong and concise ending to the essay?

Proof-reading

Have you carefully checked your text for slips in

- Spelling / punctuation / word-processing
- Grammar (e.g. verb forms, article use, singular / plural nouns)
- Style (e.g. avoiding informal vocabulary and contractions)
- Bibliography and in-text citations (see Supplement 12)?

Editing

Task 7.1

The Conclusion to the first sample Internet essay needs editing. Read it carefully and underline the parts which you think are

- unclear
- poorly expressed
- repetitive
- illogical

Decide how to improve the text and make the necessary changes

The essay was intended to discuss how beneficial the Internet is for students on master's degree programme by weighing the advantages and disadvantages of using Internet resources. Although I quite agree that Internet resources have advantages on selecting topics, referring to electronic materials, collecting data and developing academic interest, I have to admit that inefficiency in looking for resources, difficulty in evaluation resources and inappropriate use of resources would turn the whole thing upside down. In the essay, cases from self-experiences are included, as to give some indications on an efficient and proper use of Internet resources. However, fewer new ideas are given on discussing the disadvantages especially on plagiarism due to limited study on this aspect. Last but not least, the Internet is just a format of resource. There is no right or wrong with the resource, but it matters how you do with the resource. Using properly, there will be a lot of convenience for our research and study.

Proof-reading

(*Proofs* are the final draft version of a book, which the author and editor check before it is sent for printing). Proof-reading may not be the most *exciting* part of writing, but it strongly influences the **overall impression** your work makes on the readers. Make sure you allow yourself plenty of time to proof-read your assignments.

a piece of writing that has not been proof-read will irritate readers, impede rapid understanding, and cause readers to think that the writer is less intelligent and educated than may be the case.

Brookes and Grundy (1990: 60)

The use of computers means that readers' expectations about the accuracy of proof-reading in written assignments are much higher than they used to be. **Spell-check** programs are very useful, but they are not perfect:

- (1) they only recognise words that they have been programmed to recognise, so they will query every occurrence of a proper name or technical term, unless you have added them in yourself;
- (2) they don't understand the meaning of what you write, so will accept any words they recognise, even if they are in fact mis-spellings of other words: e.g. *their* for *there*, *it's* for *its*, and *practice* for *practise*.

Task 7.2

The extract below comes from an MSc project submitted by a British student. It contains at least 10 mistakes - grammar, word-processing, repetition, and punctuation. Find the errors and correct them.

The Karelian English Teaching (KET) programme has been in action for a decade. Although it's value may be difficult for British teaching assistants to perceive, the effects it is having on Karelian teachers and the students is definitely showing. On a micro level all the people who are are in contact with the assistant professionally and personally, have felt the impact on the way they perceive foreigners. Similarly the effect living in Karelia has had an effect on the lives of assistants and the their views of Karelia. On the macro level it will take some time for changes to take place English language teaching in Karelia, but the process has begun. Changes are taking place in the teaching style of Karelian teachers although there is inevitably some resistance to change but through perseverance and flexibility this change can take place.

Postscript:

Continuing to improve your writing

You can help yourself to improve your writing by paying close attention at three different stages of working on assignments for your degree course:

- when doing the **reading** for an assignment
- while doing the **writing** itself
- after you have had **feedback** on your work.

Attention when reading

Carry on doing what you have been doing in these materials: read analytically. While you are reading the articles and books recommended by your lecturers, analyse them as samples of *successful academic writing*, as well as sources of information. Reading is the key route to getting new ideas about writing, as well as the facts and concepts of your specialist field.

Attention during the writing process

Writing an assignment is likely to include at least some of the following stages:

Preparation:

- specifying the **topic** and **aims**
- **searching** for relevant literature
- **reading**
- making **notes**
- collecting and interpreting **data**
- **planning** (thinking, drafting an outline)
- **discussion** with supervisor/colleagues
- **revising outline**

Writing:

- **drafting**
- **evaluating** critically, further **planning**, further **discussion**
- **revising: redrafting** and **editing**
- **proof-reading**

Researching and writing an assignment can be a lonely activity. Discuss your ideas with someone else and get their advice, *at an early stage* in the process (e.g. when you have written a first draft). This helps you feel more confident about what you are doing, and can highlight problems in good time for you to revise your draft.

Attention after writing: Feedback

You may find that the lecturers who mark your assignment concentrate on the content and make no comment on your English. If so, take that as a **good sign**.

Even when they do say something about problems with English, British staff tend to make general comments like '*too informal*', or even just '*Grammar!*'. To make improvements in your future writing, you need to ask them for more specific feedback. For example, ask them to underline or highlight parts of your text that they found difficult to understand.

Websites on academic writing

There is a rapidly growing number of sites that address various areas of academic writing, but the quality is very variable. Below are listed some URLs that we think you may find useful.

General advice on academic writing

Advice on writing assignments is offered on the Net to students on various courses at **Edinburgh University**. Here are some examples:

<http://www.ling.ed.ac.uk/teaching/essay.shtml> (Linguistics)

http://www.pol.ed.ac.uk/pol_1/pol1ah/essayquestions.html (Politics)

http://www.bto.ed.ac.uk/guide/essays_talks.html (Biology)

Ask your Master's programme organiser whether there is such advice for your course.

One of the best sites (in my opinion) offering practical advice is one we referred to earlier in this course, the University of Toronto:

<http://www.utoronto.ca/writing/advice.html>

Another is the *Academic Phrase Bank* at the University of Manchester, which is a more comprehensive version of the **Language Boxes** in ELTT courses 4 and 5:

<http://www.phrasebank.man.ac.uk/>

Later in your course, when you may want advice on writing your Master's dissertation, have a look at

<http://www.learnerassociates.net/dissthes/>

Plagiarism

The best place to start is the Edinburgh webpage **Plagiarism Prevention and Detection: Resources for Students**

<http://www.elearn.malts.ed.ac.uk/services/plagiarism/resources-students.phtml>

Paper on the problem of 'Mouse-click plagiarism' (advice for university teachers):

<http://escalate.ac.uk/resources/webplagiarism/MouseClickPlagiarism.rtf>

A short article describing a Biology lecturer's views of the problem and strategies to avoid it:

<http://www.itl.usyd.edu.au/synergy/article.cfm?articleID=9>

A recent British plagiarism case has damaged the reputation of Dr Raj Persaud, a well-known psychiatrist. To read about it, try googling for **Persaud**.

Advice on evaluating Internet sources

These pages contain useful advice for university students on selecting Internet material:

<http://www.erin.utoronto.ca/library/utml/common/services/researchinternet.html>

<http://www.uwec.edu/library/Guides/tencs.html>

http://www.seda.ac.uk/ed_devs/vol2/online_resources.htm

The best place to start improving your writing?

On the last couple of pages we have listed only a small fraction of the websites now offering writing practice and advice to international and native-speaker students. The best way in to what is now available is via the website *Using English for Academic Purposes*, maintained by Andy Gillett of the University of Hertfordshire:

<http://www.uefap.com/links/linkfram.htm>

That will give you a better idea of the wealth of material on the Net.

If you find other websites that you think we should recommend to students, please let me know by emailing Cathy.Benson@ed.ac.uk
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I very much hope that you have found these materials enlightening and that they will help you do your next piece of course writing. If there are other areas of academic writing that you think should be covered in materials like these, please let me know.

Tony Lynch

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Answer Key and Study Notes

UNIT 1 What is 'good' academic writing?

Task 1.2

Solution below. I've underlined the good points and put the negative ones in CAPITALS.

Task 1.3 See comments on right-hand side below.

Example 1

Balanced, well argued and well presented. The summary of advantages and disadvantages was succinct and comprehensive. We noted, however, a number of ERRORS IN THE BIBLIOGRAPHY.

CRITERIA

3, 4, 6
conciseness, coverage
7

Example 2

You covered a great deal of ground, although at times you needed to ADD DEFINITIONS of technical terms. In general, a solid piece of work, but WEAKENED by poor proof-reading, spelling, bibliographical omissions, odd spelling and punctuation. CLOSER ATTENTION TO DETAIL would have improved the whole impression.

coverage
5?
6, 7
?4, 6

Example 3

Comprehensive, partly because it was TOO LONG. What should have been the 'Introduction' occupied too much space and was out of balance with the rest. Extensive use of references, although it was NOT ALWAYS CLEAR that you understood all the issues discussed. You seem still to have SERIOUS SELF-EXPRESSION PROBLEMS IN ENGLISH.

Coverage, 8
3
1, 4? (5?)
5

Example 4

SUPERFICIAL treatment - e.g. lack of discussion of underlying principles. OVER-SIMPLE ACCEPTANCE of terms used in the literature; INSUFFICIENTLY critical. You should have sought more guidance from your tutor.

2, 4
critical evaluation

Example 5

Your work is still hampered by DIFFICULTIES OF EXPRESSION - many points where your argument NEEDS CLARIFYING. You tend to adopt others' terms WITHOUT QUESTIONING them critically. A number of INCONSISTENCIES in your bibliography entries.

5
critical evaluation
7

Task 1.4 'Implicit' criteria have been shown above right, in *italics*. Examples 4 and 5 show that the markers expect students to evaluate (criticise) what they read, and not just describe it. We come back to this in Unit 4, *Critical Use of Source Materials*.

Task 1.5 is an open question.

Task 1.6 Three arguments in favour of extended hours: (1) current shortage of study space; (2) access to print materials (3) access to electronic resources. N.B. '*At the same time...*' is a marker of a counter-argument to follow. Arguments against: (1) strain on staff of unsocial hours; (2) implications of EU directive on working hours.

The writer is finally in favour: '*it should be feasible...*'

Task 1.7 There are two counter-arguments: (1) reductionist approach; and (2) no limit on features. He confirms its validity: '*Nevertheless...*'

Unit 2 Writing the Introduction

Task 2.1

Suggested answer:

Situation – sentences 1-3

Problem – sentences 4-7 (*But even... to from these problems*)

Solution – sentence 8

Evaluation – final sentence

Task 2.2 (sample essay on pages 22-25 of your *Supplementary Materials*)

I think paragraph 1 is the student's Intro. I would analyse the sentences like this:

Nowadays... **G**

Some may take... **G**

However, there has... **R**

In my point of view... **C** (thesis/main idea)

What's more... ?? (I'd say this doesn't belong in the Intro)

My purpose... **C** (aims. Not explicit enough for **Structure**))

I would improve it by adding a **Structure** sentence, or a **Background** sentence, about the Internet or university study.

It's important to bear in mind that different terms are used on Master's courses at Edinburgh to refer to various types of assignment (*exercise, short essay, long essay, project, etc.*). Bear in mind that there are no general rules about what makes any one different from another.

So you should find out the 'local' expectations by checking in your course's *Handbook*.

Supplementary Tasks (page 13)

You will find these tasks (and those for the other Units) in your supplementary materials.

Write up your answers and then compare them with the answers and solutions provided in the *Study Notes* at the back of the supplementary materials.

Unit 3 Acknowledging your sources

Task 3.1 (page 14)

I've included the text on page 14 because it's from the University of Edinburgh website, but you may find that the simpler language in the text on page 15 makes the position clearer.

If any of the issues mentioned here are not clear to you, ASK your Master's course organiser.

Task 3.2 (page 16)

Only case 8 is not plagiarism. It is the only case in which we are told that the student has acknowledged the source.

Although you may think that some cases are "more serious" than others, the official line at the University of Edinburgh is that any case of plagiarism - even unintentional - is subject to penalty in terms of loss of marks or, in extreme cases, expulsion.

I suggest you visit the University of Edinburgh website (URL on page 14) and read the official policy carefully. All students are expected (and assumed) to have read it. "Ignorance of the law is no excuse".

Task 3.3/3.4 (pages 16-17)

Para. 1 - Perfect (*has grown, has focused*) to provide general background; and Past (*was to discover, was pervasive, found*) for reference to specific studies.

Para. 2 - One case of Past (*found*). Then a shift to Present (*it is important, concludes, it is necessary*) to mention the current situation and needs.

Para. 3 - continues with Present (*is, are*), then Past for specific example (*was based on*), Present (*is a need*), and Past to show how the project started (*formed the rationale*).

Task 3.5 (page 18)

The University of Toronto site is very good - not just for reporting verbs. It's in the list of recommended websites on pages 40-41.

Task 3.6

There are none in para 1. In para 2, there is the contrast between the **quantitative** analysis (summarised in para 1) and the need for ("it is important to consider") **qualitative** study, too; again "it is necessary to combine X and Y". In para 3, "another problem... is they are very small-scale" and "pressing need for a more accurate description".

STUDY TIP:

Students often ask, "Should I summarise or should I quote?". At postgraduate level, it is rare for direct quotation to be used in science, engineering and medicine; it is more common in most humanities and social science writing (including empirical research reports, such as Granger and Tyson). If in doubt, ask the lecturer setting an assignment for advice.

Unit 4 Critical use of source materials

Task 4.1 (page 20)

The expression *critical understanding* encapsulates the need to show that you are familiar with the background literature (cf. Unit 3), but also that you have thought about weaknesses and gaps in the previous research/theory, or ways in which the authors' assumptions do not apply to the particulars of your own topic/context.

Task 4.2 (page 21)

Both assignments require the students to write a **critical section** (called *assessment* in one and *criticism* in the other). But there are a number of differences: the **length** of the assignment; its **focus**, which is *methodology* in the first, and *content and presentation* in the second.

The word '**summary**' is used differently in the two texts: a summary of the *student's own report* in the Public Health one, and of the *articles read* in Computer Science. The Computer Science assignment requires **full referencing**, while the PH task implies that **no background reading** is necessary.

Task 4.3 (p 22) – open question.

Task 4.4 (p 23)

My answer is shown below. Negative points are underlined, and positive ones are in CAPITALS.

The main thrust of the authors' argument is to discredit the 'bottom-up' model as an adequate description of competent listening. In doing this, however, they tend to undervalue the crucial importance of ... They seem to assume that ... They claim that "teaching programmes should not..." (1988: 42). It is regrettable that they give no definition of ... Moreover, it is worth noting that in their own proposed listening programme they make no mention of any sort of...

The aim of many of their listening activities is to... They attempt to get listeners to become aware of ... They thus focus on ... This is an ADMIRABLE break with traditional listening practice, which involves... The authors are ALSO TO BE COMMENDED for offering CLEAR CRITERIA for... (although little, unfortunately, is said about...) and for devising a USEFUL AND CHALLENGING means of ...

To conclude this critical examination, I believe that the emphasis on higher-level processes in the book is ENTIRELY SUITABLE for learners who ... However, I believe that it would be less suitable for beginners because...

Task 4.5

This text was found useful by students attending our ELTCpre-sessional course. If you have more 'advanced' questions about search and evaluation, try this URL:

<http://www.hopetillman.com/findqual.html>

It was compiled by a librarian (Hope Tillman) and was originally a talk she gave at Harvard, updated (2003).

Again, consult your MSc organiser for advice on any specialist web evaluation sites in your field.

Unit 5 Expressing caution

[There is additional material linked to this Unit in Supplements 10 and 11].

Task 5.1 (page 28) Here is my solution:

One point about which there is wide agreement in the literature is that transfer (both positive and negative) is more likely to take place from a language which is similar to the new foreign language being learnt, than from a language which is unrelated. There is some evidence that this can lead to more transfer taking place from the L2 than from the mother tongue, where the L2 is perceived as closer to the new language being learnt. This phenomenon has been found in all areas of language, and with specific reference to Spanish and Portuguese. Clearly, Spanish and Portuguese are closer to each other (both historically and typologically) than they are to English, and it seems to be the case that learners' perceptions of similarities between languages generally correspond to actual relatedness. Hensey (1967) analysed the errors of learners of Portuguese (both Spanish L1 and Spanish L2) and found what appeared to be Spanish-based transfer errors in vocabulary, grammar and pronunciation.

Similarity is not the only cause for L2/L3 influence proposed in the literature. Bentahila (1975) and Rivers (1979) suggest 'recency' as a possible factor: whichever foreign language was learnt most recently will influence the next language. Meisel speculates that the way in which foreign languages are stored and processed in the brain may be different from the way in which the L1 is dealt with, and that this could lead to L2/L3 influence.

Based on Benson (1990: 124)

Task 5.2 Benson was reporting the caution expressed by the source authors.

Task 5.3 (page 29)

Hedging is underlined in the box below; strengthening is in bold **CAPITALS**.

Discussion

When we compare the comments of the two groups, it is **CLEAR** that the similarities are **FAR** greater than the differences, apart from their views on whether or not they wanted to sound like native speakers or aimed for 'international intelligibility' - in other words, wanted to be easily understood but to keep their own accent in English. Most of the Hiroshima group aspired to native-like pronunciation, rather than accented international intelligibility. On the other hand, the Hong Kong students' opinions were more evenly divided: half the group (10) wanted native-like pronunciation, with most of the others (8) aiming for international intelligibility.

The comparatively high number of Hong Kong students who aimed for international intelligibility may reflect to some extent the **MUCH** higher profile of English in Hong Kong than in Japan - **NOT TO MENTION** the fact that Hong Kong English is a recognised regional variety of English. In this sense, aiming for intelligibility may be a belief based on first-hand experience of Hong Kong English or, possibly, a desire for group solidarity.

*The **OVERWHELMING** majority in both the Japanese and Hong Kong groups declared themselves 'very willing' to change their intonation, including those individuals who found English intonation 'strange' or 'different'. It could be that the fact that the two groups had relatively proficient English was also a slight influence on their views.*

Task 5.4 (page 30)

The words I would replace are shown in brackets below.

You will probably identify some of the (many) language errors in the text, but we are going to come back to them in Unit 7, *Revising your Text*, so for the moment we'll ignore them and focus on the issue of caution.

First of all, the Internet (is always) can be a good place to get started. Writing an essay is (delete 'often' = *not strong enough*) a painstaking task and sometimes you will even get stuck in choosing an appropriate topic. If it is really a problem, using a search engine by typing in several simple keywords about the topics in mind (will) may/can give you some rough pictures. It is rather like a "brainstorm" that you will find thousands of opinions and ideas for a single topic, which may reflect how "hot" the topic is, how many people have similar idea with you and how much resources on Web you can make use of. Through comparison, you may (will) find how valuable a topic is or is not.

When a topic is selected, the next step is to seek professional help and turn to electronic resources such as e-journals and e-periodicals for reference. Reading on computer perhaps not quite comfortable, but as a tradeoff, you can make marks on these e-books while doing this will never be permissible on print in the library. Moreover, as more and more researchers begin to use Internet resources, you will find a lot of articles on journals and periodicals have Internet hyperlinks as reference in their bibliographic, those you can turn to by just mouse clicks. To make the full use of the Internet, you (can also) might also be able to exchange ideas with the author or ask questions via email. In a word, the Internet provides (everything you need in) a great deal of support for your reading, not only the reading materials, but also other convenience like the search engines, electronic dictionaries, communication tools and quick access towards other materials.

Task 5.5 (page 31)

Here's my draft:

There has been an overall decline in the percentage of the population speaking Welsh over the period 1941-2001. However, the rate of decline slowed between 1981 and 2001. There is evidence of a rise in Welsh speaking among school-age children, particularly those 5-9 years old. This may be due to changes in education policy, such as the increased efforts to teach Welsh as a second language and also the introduction of Welsh-medium primary schools. It might also be related with a general increase in interest in Welsh national culture and possibly connected with the opening of the National Assembly in 1998.

Supplementary task (Study Task 11)

You can compare your interpretation of the data with mine on page 19 of the supplementary materials.

Unit 6 Writing the Conclusion

Task 6.1 (page 32)

Essay 1 has the stronger conclusion. The ending to Essay 2 is not related to the title, which asked for discussion of road transport policy in **developed** countries. So the student's Conclusion, about the **Third World**, reveals that he has not answered the question.

Task 6.2

Make sure you understand the expression 'substantive new material', because that's an important point about conclusions.

Task 6.3

This is an open question, so see what you think. My preference would be to shorten it, to make it less waffly. One or two of the sentences don't clearly convey (to me) what the student means. Below is my revised version of what the students wrote:

(I would delete sentence 1)

The Internet has four clear benefits for Master's students: it helps them to select topics, to refer to electronic materials, to collect data and to develop their interest in their field. However, one has to balance those advantages against the potential for inefficiency in looking for web resources, the difficulty in evaluating those resources, and their inappropriate use. In this essay I have included examples from my own experience, to illustrate the efficient and proper use of Internet resources, but I have focused less on disadvantages - especially plagiarism - due to the lack of available research. In the final analysis, the Internet is just one form of resource; as with any resource, there are no rights and wrongs - it is a question of how you make use of it. Used properly, the Internet can certainly facilitate students' work at postgraduate level.

Task 6.4

The elements missing, I think, are A, C and D.

Task 6.5

This conclusion is fictitious, by the way!

Sentence 1 = **A**; sentence 2 = **B**; sentence 3 = **B**; sentence 4 = **D**; sentence 5 = **F** (applications); sentence 6 = **F** (future research).

Unit 7 Revising your Text: Redrafting, editing and proofreading

Checklist (page 36)

This is basically a summary of what we have covered in the previous six Units of these materials. But the last point under the heading **The conclusion** is new: the importance of composing a strong final sentence, to leave your reader with a good impression. The sample Internet essay has a very "good" example of a weak ending.

Task 7.1 (page 37)

The sample provides plenty of room for improvement! I gave you my reformulation of the Conclusion on page 50.

You may well find that you would make changes to my version. There is, in these cases, no single correct answer. I hope this will help you appreciate that editing and improving a text is not just a question of language.

Task 7.2 (page 38)

By the way, I hope you noticed my deliberate misspelling on page 38 - under point (2), *worlds* should be *words*. Did you spot it?

Here is my solution to the proof-reading task, corrections shown in **bold**:

The Karelian English Teaching (KET) programme has been in action for a decade. Although its value may be difficult for British teaching assistants to perceive, the effects it is having on Karelian teachers and students are definitely showing. On a micro level all the people who are in contact with the assistant professionally and personally [~~delete comma~~] have felt the impact on the way they perceive foreigners. Similarly [~~delete "the effect"~~] living in Karelia has had an effect on the lives of assistants and [~~delete "the"~~] their views of Karelia. On the macro level it will take some time for changes to take place in English language teaching in Karelia, but the process has begun. Changes are taking place in the teaching style of Karelian teachers; although there is inevitably some resistance, [~~delete "but"~~] through perseverance and flexibility such changes can take place.

Postscript (pages 39-41)

This section summarises ideas and sites that ELTC students and teachers have found useful. Make sure you visit **Andy Gillett's website** ('The best place to start?' on page 41).

Tony Lynch