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2016

Academic Writing for Paramedics

Alan Batt

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ACADEMIC WRITING FOR PARAMEDICS

By Alan Batt GradCertICP MSc(c) CCP¹⁻⁵

1. Fanshawe College, London, Ontario, Canada. 2. Centre for Paramedic Education and Research, Hamilton Health Sciences, Ontario, Canada
3. Centre for Prehospital Research, University of Limerick, Ireland. 4. National Ambulance LLC, Abu Dhabi, UAE

Introduction

With the increasing move to higher education, being able to write an academic manuscript such as an essay or article has become a key skill required of paramedics and students worldwide. This guide aims to provide you with a brief explanation of one approach to academic writing. If you are an experienced writer this guide may seem simplistic – however, those with no or limited experience may find it a valuable resource.

Almost all universities and institutes require that assignments be typed or printed, or more commonly these days, submitted electronically. So firstly, a computer is necessary. Computer access may be available in your institute. Microsoft Word is a great word processor – but if you can't afford it, there are some great free alternatives such as OpenOffice and LibreOffice. A simple Google search will provide you with links to these office suite programs. Many universities and educational institutions can provide free access to a student version of Microsoft Office, or may subscribe to Office 365 or similar. Contact your local IT department for details.

Reading the question correctly is undoubtedly the most important element when writing an essay for academic coursework – make sure you answer the question that has been asked! A large number of essays receiving low grades or fails do so because the question has not been answered. Highlight key words such as 'discuss', 'evaluate' 'describe' etc., and the main topic of the question. For instance:

Example 1. “**Discuss** the prehospital management of the septic patient.”

Example 2. “**List** the factors which ensure accurate blood pressure measurement.”

Discuss here would indicate that you should present alternative viewpoints on the topic, and use literature to support your argument. List would indicate you should have several items identified which you can then discuss briefly. Read the question a number of times, and make sure you have understood what it is asking.

Structuring your work

Layout and format are important considerations when writing an academic piece. The easiest structure to follow when writing is Introduction, Main Body and Conclusion. As a general rule: “Tell the reader what you are going to tell them [introduction], tell them [main body], and then tell them what you have told them [conclusion]”. It is important to remember that when writing you should always make sure what you are writing is relevant to the question (e.g. answer the question!). It is important to keep in mind that you will need to write two or more drafts in order to achieve the best results – drafts allow you to spot spelling mistakes, layout errors and most importantly, the ‘reader factor’ – how it feels to read it.

Introduction

This should ideally be a number of paragraphs long, and should introduce the reader to the topic, and the discussion that you will present. Defining a term or element of the assignment can also be included here (e.g. tell the reader what you're addressing). Use your introduction as an attention grabber – providing statistics, or interesting information may be useful here, as long as it is justifiable and can be supported by relevant literature. This section of the manuscript sets the scene, tells the reader what you are planning to discuss later in the article, and more importantly, why.

Main body/Discussion

Present your ideas/arguments in a logical fashion, ensuring that there is smooth transition between ideas. Using paragraphs can make the presentation of arguments or discussion more logical, and will make it easier for the reader to follow. Any statements that you make (especially strong or contentious statements) should be supported using appropriate references, which will then be available in your reference list. It is important as a clinician to aim to link your assignment with clinical practice and current evidence-based practice – however don't

make the mistake of telling a story to support your argument. Try to maintain a logical flow of thoughts from your introduction to your main body and finally through to your conclusion.

Conclusion/Summary

Your conclusion should tie up all the points you have presented, provide the reader with the 'for' and 'against' of each (if applicable), and summarise your argument in a short yet coherent manner. Be careful not to just regurgitate sentences from your main body, but instead summarise your discussion in different words. Do not introduce new concepts or ideas in your conclusion, all point you wish to raise should already have been discussed earlier in the text. Use the conclusion as an opportunity however to highlight deficiencies in the topic presented – gaps in the literature, identified areas for future research and a succinct summary of findings to date.

Technical Aspects

Double line spacing

Almost all universities and colleges, and many academic journals specify that submissions must be double line spaced. Authors sometimes have trouble applying this formatting to their work. The easiest way to do this is to type your work out using single line spacing. When you have finished click Edit>Select All. This will select all the text in your article. Next in the Paragraph tab in the Home Ribbon, select the Line and Paragraph Spacing icon, and select 2.0 in the dropdown menu (Figure 1)



Figure 1

Formatting

The general format for most universities and many academic journals is using either Arial or Times New Roman font, with a font size of 12, and double spaced. Presentation of work is important when submitting. Countless authors find that headings and sub-headings start to look slightly different throughout their piece. One way of ensuring that this doesn't happen is to use Styles. Select the text you wish to format (e.g. a heading). Select the appropriate style to apply in the Home Ribbon, as in Figure 2.



Figure 2

For instance Heading 1 style is useful for separating your Introduction, Main Body and Conclusion, whilst Heading 2 or 3 can be used to divide your Main Body into distinct sub-headings (if allowed by institution standards or publication instructions).

Back it up!

A great deal of academics, students and authors have fallen victim to the corrupt disk or deleted file. Save yourself the stress and hassle of losing an article by following these rules. Be paranoid – have three to four soft copies of your assignment. Save one on your computer at home or on your laptop, one on a portable USB stick, one on an external hard drive and also email a copy to yourself. It may seem a bit excessive, but it is worth it when you find your USB stick is corrupt, you delete the document by mistake or your home computer crashes. Be sure to update all copies of your document when you have made changes to it.

Cloud storage is also an excellent idea, allowing you to edit on multiple machines whilst keeping your article up to date, and allows you to access your work from any computer connected to the internet. Examples of cloud providers include Dropbox, Google Drive, Box and Microsoft OneDrive. These will also allow you to access your document from your smartphone or tablet, or work cooperatively on documents as part of a group project. Several of these solutions also allow recovery of accidentally deleted files, and recovery of earlier versions of documents.

Help!

If you've accidentally deleted your document – stop! Check your recycle bin. If it is not there, stop using the computer. If you continue to use the computer, you may end up over-writing the space where your deleted document was stored, preventing successful recover. Ideally on a different computer, download a free copy of Recuva (<http://www.piriform.com/recuva>) – this should

be able to find your file and recover it for you. It is available in a portable version that you can install on a USB drive in case the worst happens. If this is unsuccessful, and you absolutely need to recover the document, then a trip to your IT department, or engaging the services of a computer repair technician may be necessary. You can avoid this situation entirely by ensuring you perform regular backups of your work.

Check it!

Many authors submit manuscripts that have very obvious spelling and grammatical errors. This reflects badly upon the author as there are many easy and quick tools to prevent these errors. In Microsoft Word, once you have typed your article, click on the Review Ribbon, and select Spelling & Grammar to apply a spell check to your work. Be careful with the suggestions a spellchecker suggests – it reads sentences out of context, and checks using strict rules that often are difficult to apply to normal writing.

Print out a draft of your article, and read it looking for and highlighting mistakes. Ask somebody else to read it and see if it makes sense to them. Accept their constructive criticism, and consider making any changes suggested. Microsoft Word also contains a valuable thesaurus tool. To use this simply highlight the word you wish to see alternatives for then press and hold Shift and press F7. All scientific articles are best written in simple English however, so beware overusing this tool! It is the content of your article that the reader is looking at, not how many impressive words you know.

Word Count

This is another area that seems to confuse many. In order to get an accurate word count, sometimes you need to exclude certain content such as title pages, tables, references depending on the instructions for your institution or the publication you are submitting to. In this case, select the text you wish to get a count for (press and hold Ctrl to select different portions of the manuscript), and then select review>Word Count. Be sure to read the Word Count, and not the Character Count!



Figure 3

Page Numbers

Page numbers should be included with a manuscript, especially if your work contains a number of headings and sub-headings, and should contain a table of contents. However, your title pages should not contain page numbers. The easiest method of applying page numbers to your article is to click on the Insert

Ribbon, and select Footer or Page Number as needed (Figure 4). Once viewing the footer, click on the Insert Page Number icon, and this will insert the correct page number for each page. You can change the alignment and font of this page number in the footer view, and changes will be applied to the number on all pages. You can also specify a different first page (useful for title pages), and different odd and even pages if required.



Figure 4

Referencing

A reference is any piece of material (published or unpublished, electronic or audio-visual), to which you (the writer of the article) refer. It is important to cite all these sources correctly. These references provide evidence of the point you are making, and allow the reader to consult further information on the topic if they so wish. It is also a method of acknowledging other writer's work.

Though there is no "correct" or "incorrect" way of referencing, one of the most commonly used methods for academic writing, especially in the fields of biomedical science and scientific journals, is the Vancouver System. All sources used should be properly referenced according to the following guidelines. Proper citations are a reflection of your professionalism and respect for other scholars and practitioners. Failure to do so is plagiarism and is considered a serious academic offense.

Referencing isn't difficult – it's just a matter of getting used to doing it! Just remember to be consistent, and always have somebody else check your work before submitting it. For an excellent tutorial on demystifying citing and referencing, visit Monash University's Library Tutorial - <http://www.monash.edu/library/skills/resources/tutorials/citing>.

The use of a citation manager such as Mendeley or EndNote will make formatting citations painless and allows you to change referencing styles with the click of a button to meet the style requirements of different institutions and journals. The use of a citation manager is almost mandatory to preserve sanity! This author currently utilises Mendeley, and previously used EndNote for several years before this. Some institutions have specific variations on styles, and both Mendeley and EndNote offer catalogues where you can download and install custom citation styles. If you are not already using a citation manager, research some of the various options available such as Mendeley, Zotero or EndNote. Several are free, or have free basic plans, and your institution may offer a subscription to the premium services or plans.

Consult your academic librarian for details.

You should always try to ensure that your references are primary sources, as opposed to a quote in someone else's work. There are occasions that this will not be possible. In this situation you may use a reference that has been cited by another author. It must be clear that the reference you are using is from a secondary source. This type of referencing is generally not accepted in Vancouver format, so please contact the responsible editor or your academic contact for specific advice.

Vancouver referencing within the text

Referencing within the text itself is done with reference to the author and year of publication using a numbered system. References are numbered consecutively in the order they are first used in the text. The full citations will be included in the Reference List at the end of your document, with matching numbers identifying each reference. The original number used for a reference is reused each time the reference is cited and you should include the page number for any direct quotes or specific ideas. In general, the citation in brackets is placed after any commas and periods, and before any colons and semi-colons. Whatever format is chosen, it is important that the punctuation is consistently applied to the whole document.

For a full guide to using the Vancouver referencing style, visit the Monash University Library Citing and Referencing Guide: Vancouver at <http://guides.lib.monash.edu/citing-referencing/vancouver>

Within text: Citations within the text of your paper are identified with a number in round brackets. E.g. Murphy (6) states...

Alternatively, superscript numbers can also be used, but ensure this complies with the style requirements of your institution or the journal in question. E.g. Murphy (6) states...was discovered.⁶

Multiple: When multiple references are cited together, use a hyphen to indicate a series of inclusive numbers. Use commas to indicate a series of non-inclusive numbers. A citation with these references (3,4,5,6,16,18) is abbreviated to (3-6,16,18). E.g. Several studies (3-6,9) have shown...

Direct quote: "...have shown irrational fear". (6, p125)

At the end of the work, all references used in the text are listed. This list should allow your reader to find all the references that you used in your text. You will list the citations you have included in the text in a numbered list that corresponds to the citations appearance in the text. This is where using citation management software is essential: if you move the location of a reference (for example, you move a paragraph to an earlier part of the manuscript) then these software programs will automatically re-num-

ber all references accurately for you. Otherwise, you will be left trying to re-number them all accurately.

Where there is more than one author, all authors must be cited in the same order that they appear in the book or journal. If you use material from different years for the same author then the latest work (most recent date) is listed first in the reference list followed by the entry for publications for earlier years.

Books

List up to the first six authors/editors, and use "et al." for any additional authors after the sixth.

Author Surname Initials (no more than 2). Title: subtitle. Edition (if not the first). Place of publication: Publisher; Year

1 author: Carlson BM. Human embryology and developmental biology. 4th ed. St. Louis: Mosby; 2009. 541 p

Corporate bodies

Where you wish to refer to a publication by a government department, public body or organisation the authorship is not always clear. Authorship generally resides with the publishers e.g. Department of Health, American Heart Association etc.

Journal Articles

The author's name and page number of the article are always included.

Single author:

Weingart SD. Preoxygenation, Reoxygenation, and Delayed Sequence Intubation in the Emergency Department. *J Emerg Med.* 2011 Jun;40(6):661-667.

More than one author:

Weingart SD, Levitan RM. Preoxygenation and Prevention of Desaturation During Emergency Airway Management. *Ann Emerg Med.* 2012 Mar;59(3):165-175

Editorials

Quaile A. The importance of awarding excellence. *Journal of Paramedic Practice.* 2013 Jul;5(7):369

Sometimes the author of an editorial is not included with the text. If not the references can be listed under the name of the journal.

Conference Papers

Papers from conferences should be referenced as for chapters in a book.

Corporate Authors

Any report which is not the responsibility of any one individual should be listed under the name of the body/bodies responsible for its publication. Reports should not be listed under the name of the Chairperson of a committee in spite of the fact that they may be commonly referred to in this manner.

Electronic references

It is important to reference literature from electronic sources such as databases, the internet and email clearly. The following information should be included where possible:

- Author/s name and initials
- Title of the document being referenced (with an edition or version number if later than the first) (e.g. the title of a web page, PDF document etc.)
- Year of publication
- Location – URL, ftp address, etc – wherever the user has to go to in order to locate the document in question
- DOI (if available) should be placed after the URL.
- The date you accessed the resource. This is essential if a document is likely to change or move.
- You need to check the reliability and authenticity of the information from any website. The authorship of websites can often reside with voluntary organisations, NGOs, community organisations etc.
- Website/blog posts
 - Author/organization's name. Title of the page [Internet]. Place of publication: Publisher's name; Date or year of publication [updated yr month day; cited yr month day]. Available from: URL
- Tweets
 - Author Surname Initials or Twitter name or organisation. Full text of tweet. [Twitter]. Year Month Day of Tweet posted [cited Year Month Day] [Tweet]. Available from: Twitter account url.

Accuracy

All website and email addresses should be recorded exactly as displayed within the source. All symbols etc. must be included, as well as the use of capital letters. No symbols or punctuation should be added.

CDs/DVDs

Author's name, full title of the document, full title of the CD/DVD, publisher, the date of publication. 

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Alan Batt is a faculty member in the Primary and Advanced Care Paramedic Programs in Fanshawe College, London, ON, Canada.

Email: abatt@fanshawec.ca

Twitter: @alan_batt

