



BAS KARREMAN, GELIJN WERNER,
HENK VAN DER MOLEN, EVELINE OSSEWEIJER,
MARGRIET ACKERMANN, HENK SCHMIDT
AND ESTELLA VAN DER WAL

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Academic Writing Skills for Economics and Business Administration

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Academic Writing Skills for Economics
and Business Administration

Academic Writing Skills for Economics and Business Administration

Online training course at www.academicwritingskills-eba.com

Bas Karreman
Gelijm Werner
Henk van der Molen
Eveline Osseweijer
Margriet Ackermann
Henk Schmidt
Estella van der Wal

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Cover design: Cunera Joosten, Amsterdam

Cover photo: Sergign

Interior layout: Textcetera, Den Haag

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ISBN 90-5875-809-5

ISBN 90-5875-810-1 (e-book)

NUR 780

www.academicwritingskills-eba.com

www.boomhogeronderwijs.nl

Preface

Both the design and content of this new course for Economics and Business Administration students are in part similar to those of the original course for students in the Psychology and Education programmes.

We wish to thank Prof. Jos ten Berge of the Faculty of Behavioural and Social Sciences at the Rijksuniversiteit Groningen, Rolandt Tweehuysen and Joost den Haan at De Twee Hanen V.O.F., Alain Bazin and Trevor Stam at ESB, and Prof. Ivo Arnold, Prof. Enrico Pennings, Prof. Kirsten Rohde and Dr Thomas Peeters of the Erasmus School of Economics at EUR for their comments on earlier versions of this book. The authors welcome comments and suggestions, which can be passed on to us through the website.

Bas Karreman
Gelijm Werner
Henk van der Molen
Eveline Osseweijer
Margriet Ackermann
Henk Schmidt
Estella van der Wal

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Introduction

In their work, university and college graduates are regularly required to produce writing. Whether for a policy document, an academic text or a report, a well-structured and clear writing style is always very important. In particular, professional writing means that what you are trying to convey gets across to the reader properly. Those who write badly are not taken seriously. Thus, an incomprehensible policy document will end up at the bottom of the drawer. An innovative academic text will be rejected if it is full of grammatical errors. And a client who gets an unclear report will be unable to implement its advice effectively, and is therefore dissatisfied.

The quality of graduates' written output often falls short of what is required. However, with diligent practice, writing is a skill you can learn. In such practice, different writing skills need to be distinguished such as effective structuring, flawless spelling and summarising.

In theory, students already receive a fairly intensive writing training during their degree programme, for example through the numerous reports they are required to produce, which are read and commented on by their lecturers. In practice, however, writing skills are usually neglected in higher education. Giving helpful comments on written reports is time-consuming and therefore expensive. Moreover, reviewing reports is often frustrating for lecturers, as students generally tend to make the same mistakes. Lecturers therefore regard such checking as a waste of their time. As a result, at many educational institutions, writing instruction is generally confined to producing a number of reports with minimal instructions and few specific comments from the lecturer. Students are expected to learn writing more or less automatically by producing such reports for their different courses. In these reports, however, the emphasis is usually on content, not on how the text is written. The consequence of all this is that many students in higher education do not really learn how to write proficiently.

To address this problem, the authors of this book, who are connected with the Erasmus School of Economics and the Institute of Psychology at the Erasmus University Rotterdam, have developed a digital course entitled *Academic Writing Skills for Economics and Business Administration* in collaboration with the economics journal *Economisch Statistische Berichten*. The aim of this course is to give students more

specific practice as to various ‘micro’ writing skills, without lecturers having to put a lot of time into instruction and commentary. The course consists of ten digital chapters in which students can practise various sub-skills. Examples of these sub-skills include formulating a specific research question, dividing text into paragraphs effectively, ensuring good coherence between sentences and paragraphs, and preparing figures and tables.

Each chapter starts with an *explanation* of a particular aspect of writing. This explanation leads to a *rule of thumb*, a kind of guideline that students can use when writing a report. Finally, some *brief exercises* are set in which students have to apply the rule of thumb. Thus the programme not only provides information about various ‘micro’ skills, but also gets students to apply that information.

As there are no strict rules for what ultimately constitutes a good text, the feedback on the exercises usually consists of presenting a good example: the so-called *expert version*. This good example was written by someone with a lot of writing experience, so that students can compare their own work with the expert version. Finally, they can then use the rules of thumb to both produce and revise their own writing assignment. By taking the writing course, students gain insight into numerous rules that are important for writing a text. The exercises are a way of becoming more skilled at writing, without a lecturer always having to check and comment on texts. The general explanation provided in each chapter also takes care of the problem that lecturers time and again have to explain the same mistakes to their different students.

The original course for Psychology students

The course *Academic Writing Skills* was originally developed at the Institute of Psychology of Erasmus University Rotterdam (EUR). In the academic year 2003–2004, trials were held with the digital programmes in the first two years of the Psychology degree programme. Education surveys showed that students found working with the programmes useful and the rules of thumb clear and applicable. Most students prefer to work with the digital programme rather than with just the book, because they can immediately put lessons learnt from the programme into practice. The success of the *Academic Writing Skills* course in the Psychology degree programme has resulted in the present version of the book, which specifically focuses on the Economics and Business Administration programmes.

Differences in comparison to the course for Psychology and Education students

This new course for students of Economics and Business Administration differs in three respects from the original course for students of Psychology and Education.

1. *Nature of the academic text*

First and foremost, the nature of the academic text for which the student is acquiring these writing skills is different. The course for students of Psychology and Education focuses on an *academic literature review report* – one that describes insights and results from the literature. By contrast, the course for students of Economics and Business Administration deals with producing an *empirical academic report*. This is a report in which data are analysed in order to test theories and hypotheses. Empirical research is very diverse and includes many different types, forms and analytical techniques. It is therefore necessary to specify the nature of the academic report in more detail. This course will focus on *quantitative* empirical research, in which statistical and numerical research methods are central.

The choice of a quantitative empirical report reflects the tradition in economics of taking an analytical approach to empirical issues. In contrast to the more holistic approach in qualitative research, economists have a strong preference for working with a specific and easily measurable question, which is then empirically investigated by explicit testing of theories and hypotheses. This close examination is partly made possible by the availability of previous research data known as secondary data. Macro, financial and economic data are generally available. However, this does not rule out the use of primary data: economists and business specialists are adept at collecting new data of their own by means of experiments, questionnaires and so on.

As well as this tradition in economics, there is also a practical reason for choosing quantitative empirical research: the use of statistical methods and techniques on empirical data is an essential part of the curriculum of an Economics and Business Administration programme. Because close examination of a research question is only possible with the right analytical techniques, considerable attention is given in the study of economics to quantitative research methods and statistics. Often, however, the careful and clear reporting of quantitative empirical research receives less attention, despite the fact that students are expected to be able to do so.

To prepare students for writing reports of this kind, three additional chapters have been added to the original course. The first of these is about staking out and discussing a theoretical framework. The second chapter concerns reporting data, sample selection and analytical technique. In the third and final extra chapter, the reporting of research results is addressed, including new digital programmes for displaying mathematical formulas, figures and tables. These additional chapters are necessary because the content of an empirical report cannot be clear and convincing if the statistical models, analytical techniques and research results are not clearly presented.

2. *Meticulousness and integrity*

The second difference from the original course is that the course for Economics and Business Administration students includes an additional digital programme, Chapter 5, on how to conduct an empirical research meticulously and on *academic integrity*. These are two topics that are often unjustly neglected in writing courses where empirical research is central.

3. *Economic context*

Thirdly, the examples and exercises in the chapters mostly have an *economic context* rather than a psychological one. The economic topics that come up in the examples and exercises are very diverse and closely reflect the field of knowledge of economists and business administration specialists.

Finally, this book can also be used as a reference work. It contains all the information that appears in the digital programmes, so that the user can go back to it and re-read it. It also includes brief instructions for lecturers and students on the use of the chapters. The chapters themselves are available at www.academicwritingskills-eba.com. The book contains an access code with which the student can enter the site.

Possibilities of www.academicwritingskills-eba.com for lecturers

Upon requesting a lecturer's copy of the book, lecturers automatically receive an email with the login data for their personal lecturer's account. They therefore do not need to avail themselves of the activation code from the book, which is used to activate a student account. The lecturer's account gives lecturers the following additional data:

The correct answer

If you log into the system as a lecturer, you will immediately see *the correct answer* filled in at each question. To see the feedback that the students receive, click the 'submit answer' button.

Student monitoring system

Many lecturers like to see how their students are progressing as to using the course. The website therefore includes a student monitoring system. More details about this can be found at www.academicwritingskills-eba.com.

Guidance for your own students only

It is possible to add comments to the pages that only your own students will see. Your students can only read these comments if they link your code to their account. More details about this can be found on the website.

A closer look at the chapters

This section explains how the chapters should be used and what they contain.

The use of the chapters by lecturers

The chapters can be used in various ways in the writing skills courses. As a lecturer, you are of course free to choose here. As an example, we give a description below of how the chapters are used in the writing course of the Economics programme at EUR.

Example: the Economics writing course at EUR

Within the Economics programme at EUR, the academic writing course consists of three courses of seven weeks each. The courses take place in the last three blocks of the Bachelor programme's first year. At the core of both courses is a *writing assignment* that is supported by the digital programmes. The writing assignment consists of a report in which students must answer a question on the basis of empirical research. The student carries out the empirical research, but in terms of content and guidance this is not part of the writing course. In addition to the writing course, guidance on conducting the empirical research is provided by the teams of lecturers teaching the subjects that students take in each block. At the Erasmus School of Economics, the three subjects concerned are Macroeconomics, Marketing, and Organisation and Strategy.

In the first course students learn how to write a theoretical background including a literature review. The second course focuses on reporting the data, the methodology and the results of empirical research. Because students find this reporting difficult, the second course gives detailed attention to it. In the third course, the student practises writing a complete research report. As stated, students work their way through all of the chapters in the last three blocks of the first year. During the second year of the programme, they then have to write another whole research report, in order to refresh the knowledge they acquired from both the chapters and the guidelines.

Academic Writing Skills for Economics and Business Administration

For many students writing an academic text can be challenging. However, with diligent practice, academic writing is a skill you can learn. The online writing course *Academic Writing Skills for Economics and Business Administration* offers students specific practice as to various 'micro' writing skills, including the structure of an academic text, the theoretical framework, data and methodology, results, as well as citing, paraphrasing and quoting, argumentation, cohesion and sentence structure, and style, grammar and punctuation.

Each chapter starts with an explanation of a particular aspect of writing. This explanation leads to a rule of thumb and several brief online exercises. Feedback on the exercises consists of a good example, the so-called expert version, with which students may wish to compare their own work. In the end, students can apply the rules of thumb to both producing and revising their own academic writing assignments. The combination of clearly explained 'micro' writing skills and exercises to practice these makes for a highly effective training course.

Students can use the access code to log in to the online exercises at www.academicwritingskills-eba.com. Teachers can locate their students on the website and track their progress. The book can be used as a source of reference.



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