

Improving the clarity of your writing

1 Identify what is causing your difficulty with writing

It is quite common to receive feedback on a piece of written work that comments on 'poor style' or 'unclear expression'. Unfortunately, it is often hard to identify what exactly is wrong with the way you have been writing.

Here are a few things to consider:

Understanding your content	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do you actually have a clear enough understanding of WHAT you are writing about? • If you are uncertain about your subject matter, it is unsurprising that your explanations can seem a little muddled to others. However good you are at writing, you will never express yourself clearly about a topic if you are hesitant about its contents.
Getting to grips with the language	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do you feel that you can handle the technical aspects of the content you are writing about, but that you struggle to choose the right WORDS through which to express your ideas? • Learning to participate within your academic discipline means that you need to get to grips not only with new concepts and terminology, but with the LANGUAGE that is used in the field. This is the same for all of us, whether or not we are writing in our first language.
Getting things down on paper	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do you find that you can SPEAK quite comfortably about your ideas, but that you struggle to put them down ON PAPER? • This is a surprisingly common problem, but one that is relatively easy to solve.
Editing and proofreading	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Could your writing benefit from more careful editing and proofreading? • This is not just a time problem - sometimes, we need a little help knowing what to look out for in these stages.

2 Do you fully understand the ideas and concepts you are writing about?



When you are writing for assessment, you are likely to be being tested on your understanding of new ideas. You therefore have two different tasks to juggle:

1. You are trying to understand something that is quite complex;
2. You need to write the perfect text that will show off this understanding.

You need to keep both tasks in mind, and it simply isn't possible to write an amazing essay or report if you are unclear about some of the ideas you are writing about. This can be one of the most common causes of poor expression.

The 60 second test

One way to test how well you understand something is to try explaining it aloud in 60 seconds - either to somebody else, or just by yourself. If you struggle to do this, it may be that you need to spend a little bit more time thinking about the core points that you feel are important, before trying to plan out a written text.

The visual summary test

You might also find it helpful to convert the key ideas that you wish to write about into a diagram, table, or series of bullet points. Once again, the aim is to reduce the content to a very brief summary, cutting out all of the detail and explanation. This is the content that must remain clear as you start to build up your written text.

If you struggle to do these things, try to identify what it is that you do not understand. You may need to do some more reading, or perhaps find somebody else who can explain it to you. Often, talking through the problem with someone else will help clarify things in your mind.

3 Is it hard to find the right words to explain these ideas and concepts?

As you learn new ideas, concepts and perspectives, you will also be exposed to a whole new range of language that you may not be used to using. It can make it difficult to express yourself clearly in writing if you do not feel confident about using the vocabulary and discourse of your subject.

For example, many Literature and Politics students find it difficult to write about 'ideology' to begin with. They seem to have a good, general idea of what the concept means, but they struggle to fit it into their own essays in a convincing way. It can be hard to know whether the term should be used,

- in a specific sense (e.g. Conservative ideology) or a general sense (e.g. the circulation of ideology);
- in the singular (ideology) or the plural (ideologies);
- in a negative sense (e.g. a set of beliefs associated with oppression) or in a neutral sense (e.g. simply a shared set of beliefs)

The best way to work out how a concept is used in your own discipline is to see how other people use it. The important thing to note is that academic terms are not used in isolation - we use bundles of vocabulary together, and you need to start noticing the patterns in which words occur. If you feel you are struggling, you should look out for the patterns that other scholars use.

So how can you do this?

In your reading

Identify a specific key concept that you find difficult to write about. Try running an electronic search for that concept in some key journal articles, including different forms of the word(s) where appropriate (e.g. singular and plural, noun and verb).

Have a look at the language that is used surrounding your difficult concept – What other words are used before and after it? What grammatical structures are used? Is it used in a general sense or a specific sense?

In your lectures and seminars

Another good source of academic terminology being used in context is obviously your lectures and seminars. Listen to your tutors as they present different debates, express their own opinions, explain new concepts, and so on. They are modelling appropriate academic discourse as they speak, so you should be listening to the way they express ideas.

Of course, a lecture or a seminar is very different to a piece of formal academic writing, but you will begin to get a feel for the way the terminology of your discipline is handled. It might help to note down some of the phrases used in presentations or on teaching materials.

4 Are you struggling to put things down on paper?

A number of people can explain their ideas very clearly to another person, but simply struggle to WRITE THESE IDEAS DOWN. There are several things you can try in order to overcome this type of 'writer's block'.

Try it out loud

Firstly, if you really do feel comfortable saying your ideas aloud, then why not record yourself while you do this? Just use your phone or another audio device, and then have a go at explaining the key points of your argument.

Don't worry if you make mistakes - just say what comes into your mind. The next step is to play the recording back and type up what you have said. You can either edit as you go along, or type your exact words first, before doing the editing. This won't produce a perfect essay first time round, but it will certainly get you started.

Keep it simple

Secondly, whether you prefer to speak or write your ideas, don't get hung up on finding the perfect words - use simple English and short sentences to start with, to make sure that your meaning will be clear.

Although we are dealing with complicated ideas, and there is certainly a lot of unfamiliar vocabulary that we need to get to grips with, some of the best academic writing actually uses very simple language. It seems to be a myth that using a "formal style" means using long words and complex grammatical structures, but this is not necessarily the case. Clarity is the most important thing. Once you have mastered the art of explaining your ideas, and you become used to writing (and reading) about these topics, your style of writing will naturally develop in ways that will incorporate appropriately complex language more smoothly.

Try 'free-writing'

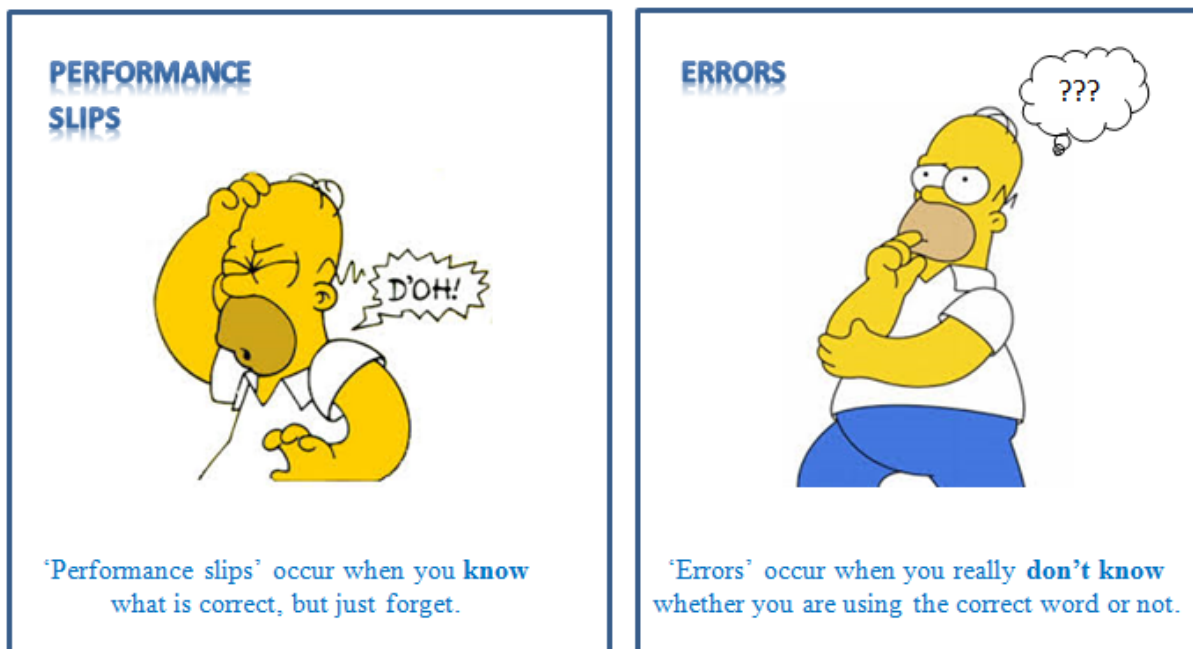
You might also want to try 'free-writing' - a kind of automatic writing in which you get your ideas down onto the page, without stopping to re-read or edit the text. It's a way of getting started without worrying about what other people will think, and without judging yourself as you write. The way to do it is to set a time limit (e.g. 10 minutes) in which you force yourself to keep writing without stopping. Just write whatever comes into your mind and keep the pen moving (even if you have to write 'I don't know what to write!'). You can tidy it up later, but this is a great way to get some ideas down and defy the writer's block.

You will find a free-writing tool on our website to help you practise this.

5 Do you need help proofreading for mistakes?

A first step here is to understand what you mean by 'mistakes'.

We think it is helpful to distinguish between 'performance slips' and 'errors':



Strategies to help you

Learn to identify the basic **PERFORMANCE SLIPS** that trip you up,

e.g. Do you forget to add - s on plural nouns?

or Do you forget to add - ed to mark past simple verbs?

Proofread your work for each one, **but only scan for one of them at a time.**

This will be tedious at first, but this exercise will help you to stop making these slips.

However, if you consistently make the same **ERROR**, find out what the rule is! If you do not know how to use a feature such as the definite article ('the'), you will make constant errors, and no amount of proofreading will help you until you learn the rules.

One of our tutors can guide you to the materials to help you do this, or you can find further support available from the QMUL Language Centre, including a selection of online resources to help you improve your Academic English.