

# **ACADEMIC WRITING SKILLS FOR ECONOMICS AND BUSINESS ADMINISTRATION**

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**Boom**

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# 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.

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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 report that is unclear or incomplete can hinder the implementation of recommendations and lead to dissatisfaction amongst clients.

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. As a result, at 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 Erasmus School of Economics and the Institute of Psychology at Erasmus University Rotterdam (EUR), 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 allow students to practise specifically with various 'micro' writing skills, without lecturers having to spend a lot of time on instruction and commenting on papers. The course consists of 11 (digital) modules 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 module 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, a number of brief exercises are presented, allowing students 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 module 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 Academic Writing Skills course was originally developed at the EUR Institute of Psychology. 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 of the Psychology degree programme has resulted in the present version of the book, which specifically focuses on the Economics and Business Administration programmes.

### **Differences compared to the first edition**

This renewed course for students of Economics and Business Administration is largely similar to the first edition, but includes several important revisions. To provide a good explanation of why these changes have been made, it is important to first explain the nature of the academic text for which the student is acquiring these writing skills. Students in Economics and Business Administration learn to write 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.

However, an important disadvantage of the quantitative empirical focus is that the course does not offer writing training for students working on different types of reports. For example, students who want to report theoretical or experimental research, record the primary data collection process, or write a policy report are not trained in doing so. Many suggestions from users of the first edition of this book pertained to developing the skills to write a wider range of academic texts. To meet this request as best as possible without losing focus on the broader objective, two important substantive revisions were made. A third important change concerns reasoning errors and the use of fallacies.

### **1. Structure of other types of texts**

As we recognise the importance of addressing a broader range of academic texts, this edition includes a module that focuses on literature reviews as well as theoretical and experimental research. In Module 6, the general structure of these types of texts is briefly outlined. We explain how this structure differs from a quantitative empirical academic report, which serves as the basis for this book. We also discuss how to structure policy reports and guidance notes.

### **2. Mathematical writing**

To make the book more accessible to students of (applied) econometrics, this updated version elaborates on mathematical writing. Besides econometricians, many economists and business administrators use mathematical notations to define variables, build models, derive formulas or provide evidence. Because consistency in notation and style is essential

for clear mathematical exposition, the basic rules of mathematical writing are explained and illustrated with examples. In order not to interrupt the flow of the book, we have included the mathematical writing manual in a separate appendix in the online learning environment.

### **Reasoning errors**

We all make errors in reasoning. In fact, in the current societal debate on climate change and the environment, reasoning errors are made remarkably often. Sometimes these mistakes are made unconsciously, but they can also be used deliberately, for example to strengthen a line of argument. It is important that students are aware of this – not only to better understand texts or discussions, but also to prevent reasoning errors in their own writing.

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 reread it. It also includes brief instructions for lecturers and students on the use of the modules. The modules themselves are available at Boom Academie. The access code in this book can be used to access the course content online.

### **The use of the modules by students**

When you bought this book, you may have been told how to use these modules. Or you may have purchased this book because you were interested in enhancing your academic writing skills. If so, you can work your way through the modules in whatever order seems useful to you. The various modules can be used independently of one another. But, whatever you do, always take the time to revise your text. When you think you have finished the text, put it aside for a few days and then go over it carefully one more time. It is also sensible to get someone else to read your text and to ask this person for comments on points you are not quite sure about. As guidelines to writing and revising the text, you can use the rules of thumb encountered while working with the modules. In short, this book can also serve as a reference book in which to look up the rules of thumb and the associated explanations.