

Henk van der Molen  
Margriet Ackermann  
Eveline Osseweijer  
Henk Schmidt  
Estella van der Wal  
Benjamin de Boer  
Marika Polak

Boom

# Academic Writing Skills

Digital skills training in academic writing  
for psychology, pedagogy & education,  
and social sciences.



3rd EDITION



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Third edition

**Henk T. van der Molen**  
**Margriet Ackermann**  
**Eveline M. Osseweijer**  
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**Benjamin B. de Boer**  
**Marike Polak**

**Boom**

+ website!

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# Preface

University or college graduates regularly have to write a text as part of their job requirements. Whether these texts are policy documents, scientific articles, or reports about a client, in all these cases a structured and clear writing style is of great importance. Professional writing means verbalising your ideas in such a way that their meaning and intent become clear to the reader. A person who is not able to write clearly is often not taken seriously. A policy document that cannot be understood ends up in the bottom of a drawer. An innovative scientific article will be refused if it's full of grammatical errors. The consequence of an unclear report about a client could be that this client does not receive the required help.

Although university or college graduates have completed a higher education programme, they often still lack adequate writing skills. Newly graduated students frequently find themselves struggling when they have to write a text. However, through practise they can learn how to write properly. Different writing skills need to be distinguished in these exercises, such as structuring a text, spelling correctly and adequately summarising the content.

Students should already have received intensive training in these skills during their education. For example, by writing various reports that their lecturers read and comment on. However, in practice, the training of writing skills often does not receive much attention in higher education programmes. One of the reasons is that providing written reports with good comments takes a lot of time and is therefore expensive. Furthermore, having to review these reports is often frustrating for lecturers. Most students make the same type of mistake, which forces lecturers to give the same comments over and over again. This often leads lecturers to form the opinion that providing these comments is 'a waste of time'. In many educational institutions, training in writing skills therefore remains limited to writing a few reports, with minimal instruction and only a few specific comments from the lecturers. It is expected that students master writing skills more or less on their own, by writing these reports for different courses. However, in these reports, the main focus of the feedback is on the content, and much

less on how the report is written. As a consequence, many students in higher education do not really learn how to write well.

To tackle this problem, the authors of this book, all affiliated with the Institute for Psychology at the Erasmus University Rotterdam in the Netherlands, have developed a digital course called *Academic Writing Skills*. The aim of this course is to provide students with more targeted exercises in 'micro' writing skills, without the need for lecturers to invest much time providing instructions and comments. The name of the course indicates that the focus is on exercises that students can do by themselves in order to practise their writing skills. The course consists of nine digital programmes that have been given the title *Diskits* (abbreviation of digital skills training). Through these digital programmes, students can practise different micro writing skills. Examples of these micro-skills are: structuring paragraphs, creating cohesion within sentences, subparagraphs and paragraphs, and formulating a specific central question.

Each Diskit starts with an *explanation* of a certain aspect of writing. This explanation leads to a *rule of thumb*, a guideline which students can use for writing a report. Examples of rules of thumb are: 'Only discuss one topic per paragraph', or 'Avoid complex phrasing'. After this, *short exercises* are presented that require students to use the rule of thumb. So, not only does the programme provide information about the various micro-skills, but it also allows the student to practise these skills. Because there are no strict rules as to what constitutes a good text, the feedback on the completed exercises often consists of a good example, the so-called *expert version*. This good example is written by someone who has extensive experience with writing. Students can compare their own answer to the expert version. Eventually, they can use the rule of thumb for writing and revising their own assignments. By taking a writing skills training course in this structured manner, students gain knowledge of a large number of rules that are important when they have to write a text. The exercises in the Diskits offer a way to become more skilled in writing, without the need for a lecturer to regularly review and provide comments on these texts. The general explanations in each Diskit help to solve the problem of lecturers frequently having to provide the same feedback to different students.

As mentioned above, the *Academic Writing Skills* course has been developed at the Institute for Psychology at the Erasmus University Rotterdam. Since the academic year 2003-2004, we have experimented with the digital programmes in the first and second year of the Psychology bachelor programme. The outcomes of the evaluations of this training using questionnaires show that students consider the training to be very useful. The rules of thumb are found to be clear and applicable. Most students (76%) prefer working with the digital programmes over only using the book, because it allows them to immediately apply the lessons from the programme. Overall, the students rate the programme as 'good'.

This book can be used as a handbook. It contains all the information that is also provided in the Diskits, making it easy to go over the information again after completing them. Furthermore, this book contains a short instruction for lecturers and for students regarding the use of the Diskits. These Diskits are available via [www.boomstudent.nl](http://www.boomstudent.nl). The reader will find an activation code in the book that can be used to access the website. Lecturers can request an activation code by contacting the publisher in order to gain access to the website as well. On the website, they can keep track of their students and the results of the training.

## New to this edition

In the second edition of this book the writing of a scientific review article has been emphasized. This has been done by describing the characteristics and the various stages in the writing process of such an article. In line with this additional content, a new chapter has been devoted to the search for and selection of scientific literature. Also more attention has been paid to the description and processing of scientific sources in a text. Several new exercises have also been linked to this topic.

In this new third edition, the text and exercises have been aligned with the most recent seventh edition of the *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association*.



## Words of thanks

The second edition of this book would not have been possible without the assistance of Judith Gulpers, Faculty Liaison Philosophy & Psychology of the University Library of the Erasmus University Rotterdam. We would like to thank Judith for her assistance in developing information and exercise materials relating to the search for scientific literature in Scopus.

The authors welcome any comments. These can be sent to us via the website.

Henk T. van der Molen  
Margriet Ackermann  
Eveline M. Osseweijer  
Henk G. Schmidt  
Estella van der Wal  
Benjamin B. de Boer  
MARIKE POLAK

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# Use of the Diskits by lecturers

The Diskits can be used in different ways in writing skills training courses. As a lecturer, you are of course free to choose how to use them. As an example, we will provide a description of the way the Diskits are used in the writing skills courses of the Psychology bachelor programme at the Erasmus University of Rotterdam.

*An example: the writing skills training for bachelor students of Psychology at the Erasmus University of Rotterdam.*

The writing skills training of the psychology programme consists of two modules that are given in the first and second year of the bachelor programme. The core of both modules is a writing assignment that is supported by the Diskits. In both years, the assignment consists of writing a short scientific review article in which the students address a key question based on the review of literature. However, in the second year, a more critical processing of the literature is required from the students. All Diskits have to be completed by students in the first year. In their second year, students can consult the Diskits again to revisit the guidelines for the various aspects of writing. The structure of the writing skills course follows the three stages of the writing process: preparation, writing and revision.

In the first stage, the students prepare for the writing assignment. This includes gathering information on a topic, formulating a carefully defined central question and searching for, reading and assessing relevant literature. In this stage, the students work on a draft structure for the article. This draft structure should include the various headings of the article. For each heading, students have to provide a brief explanation of the literature they are planning to discuss. In this period, the students complete the first three Diskits and apply the rules of thumb they have learned to prepare the draft structure. The students submit their draft structure at the end of the preparation stage. The draft is not graded, but the students are given feedback since many of them find it difficult to draft a proper structure for their article.

In the second stage, the students write an initial version of the article. In this stage, they complete Diskit 4, 5 and 6 and apply the rules of thumb they have learned to write an initial version. The students also receive feedback on this version. Since many students leave things to the last minute, the revision stage of writing is often omitted. However, when we set up the programme, we opted for a halfway deadline for the initial version, as it is important that students learn to critically read and improve what they have written.

After receiving feedback on their initial version, the students will start to rewrite their article. They complete the final Diskits in this stage. They must use the rules of thumb they have learned to check their article line by line and to see if any passages or sentences can be improved. At the end of this stage, the final version of the assignment must be submitted to the lecturer. The criteria used to assess the assignment are based on the content of the Diskits. Aspects of the Diskits covered in the first year are used again to assess the assignment in the second year. See the appendix at the end of this book for the assessment criteria.

# Use of the Diskits by students

Your lecturer will likely have provided you with guidelines on how to use the Diskits when you had to purchase this book for your studies. You may also have purchased this book out of your own interest in improving your writing skills. In that case, you can complete the Diskits in the order you find most suitable. The different Diskits can be used independently. As a helpful tip, we suggest you take plenty of time revising your writing assignment. When you think your assignment is finished, put it aside for a few days and review it thoroughly later. You will also find it useful to have somebody else read it and to ask for feedback on certain points that you may be less sure about. You can use the rules of thumb that you learn from working on the Diskits as guidelines when writing and revising your text. This book can be used as a handbook, in order to go over the rules of thumb and their explanations again after completing the Diskits.



# Short overview of the Diskit content

*Diskit 1: General structure* covers the general structure of a text. How can students make sure that the common theme of their report is clear to the reader? In the first place, structure relates to the different sections in the report. Each section is then further divided into paragraphs.

*Diskit 2: Scientific review article* deals with the characteristics of a scientific review article. In this Diskit, the students learn what a review article is and how it is written by briefly going over the different stages of the writing process.

*Diskit 3: Preparing for the writing process* deals with the first stage of the writing process. The students learn how to gather information on a topic, how to draw up a search profile and which search methods they can use to find relevant literature.

*Diskit 4: Writing of content* deals with the structure of a scientific review article. The students learn which information should be provided in the introduction, in the middle section, in the discussion and conclusion, and in the abstract for such an article.

*Diskit 5: Citing, paraphrasing and quoting* looks at the way in which students can use literature from other authors in their own report without committing plagiarism. For this, the rules and guidelines from the internationally leading citing system of the American Psychological Association (APA) are used. These rules can also be used for other social sciences. Students learn how to cite the work of other authors in the text and how to write a reference list. Subsequently, students learn how to refer to texts of others using their own words (paraphrasing) and what the rules are for quoting others.



*Diskit 6: Argumentation* deals with different kinds of arguments and their structures. The students learn how to substantiate their position in an article. Specific attention is paid to the characteristics of scientific argumentation. The Diskit also deals with reasoning errors, such as fallacies.

*Diskit 7: Cohesion and sentence structure* deals with the cohesion within a text and between the separate sentences of a text. Students are told how to make sure that the text forms a whole and doesn't wander in different directions. Different sentence structures are also discussed. Moreover, attention is given to types of sentences that are easier or more difficult to read.

*Diskit 8: Scientific writing* deals with the style of writing that is appropriate within a scientific context. The writing style should match the goal of the text and what it intends to communicate. A journalist, for instance, can use an ironic style for a column in a newspaper; however, this is not suitable for a scientific article. In science, it is common to write in an objective, formal and clear manner. This Diskit explains how students can achieve this style of writing.

*Diskit 9: Revision and completion* deals with several grammatical rules that students often get wrong. The use of punctuation is also briefly discussed. Furthermore, attention is given to the final revisions on content. Is all the necessary information provided clearly in the text? Finally, the general appearance of the text is discussed. For this, the guidelines of the American Psychological Association are mentioned, for example regarding layout and using tables.

Many students have difficulties writing well-structured and readable texts. **Academic Writing Skills** breaks down the writing process into various skills that students can use to practice independently.

On the accompanying website these skills are discussed using rules of thumb, several short exercises and examples of the right answer. By combining a clear explanation of the various skills and exercises with feedback, the training course has proven to be very effective.

The following subjects are dealt with: the structure of a text, a scientific review article, preparing for writing, the content of the text, references, paraphrasing, citations, argumentation, cohesion, sentence structure, academic writing style, revisions and how to finalize a text.

**Academic Writing Skills** consists of a detailed online writing training and a book that can be used as a reference for the training.

In this new third edition, the text and exercises have been aligned with the most recent seventh edition of the Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association.

**Academic Writing Skills** is suitable for bachelor students of *psychology, pedagogy and education, sociology, public administration, and other social sciences.*



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