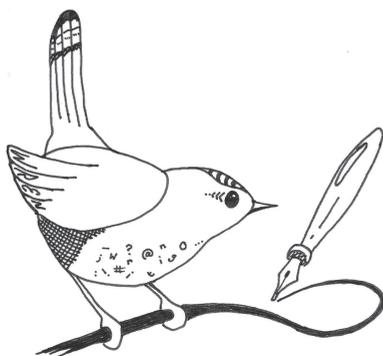# WREN

Advanced English writing skills
for third-level students

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**Advanced English writing skills
for third-level students**

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Contents

PART 3 ACCURACY

Dedicated to the memory of
Paul Robberecht

Hij zwijgt, omdat hij weet.

Introduction

Have you ever sat in front of a computer screen, for what seems an age, trying to formulate that first sentence of an essay? Have you had doubts about the tone of your email to a teacher, or had difficulty using your notes because key information is missing? These frustrating situations underline the fact that writing, in its many forms, is challenging. Moreover, the size of the challenge only seems to increase when faced with writing in a language that is not our mother-tongue. There might be uncertainties about spelling and punctuation, worries over the accuracy of grammar, and frustration at not achieving the kind of `flow´ we see in native-speaker texts.

These difficulties, and many others besides, are obstacles to achieving the prime objective of writing, *effective communication*. Ideally, we want to produce texts that will convey ideas and information to our intended readers in a clear, efficient and appropriate manner; but it often requires strenuous effort to progress along the path towards that ideal.

The good news is that the difficulties outlined above are by no means insurmountable. Yes, writing is a challenge, but it is also a skill that with guidance and practice can be acquired, developed and refined. *Writing in English* (or *Wren* for short) has been written with that process in mind. Guidance comes in the form of detailed instruction on a range of techniques that are central to developing sound writing skills, and on specific genres with their attendant conventions. Practice is provided via exercises designed to support your growth as a writer of English-language texts.

The book is primarily aimed at third-level students (university-college or university) whose mother-tongue is Dutch and who wish to develop their English writing skills across a range of genres at an advanced level; but it is also suitable for final-year secondary-school pupils for whom English will be an important part of their further studies.

The book is divided into two main sections: *Core skills* and *Genres. Core skills* focuses on activities and competences that are essential to a wide range of text types. Whether writing an essay, an abstract or a formal letter, you will need to be able to coordinate a range of skills, including, expressing an idea in different ways (paraphrasing), linking information or phases of an argument in a clear and logical manner (cohesion) and using vocabulary and functional phrases appropriate to the context (register). *Wren* provides a chapter-length treatment of each of these skills. The *Core skills* section also includes a chapter on note-taking, a primary skill that aids understanding and forms the basis for 'finished' written texts, but a skill that is all-too-often overlooked in writing courses and guides.

The *Genres* section covers a range of text types that are common within an academic environment (e.g. expository essay, peer review, abstract and research paper) but also includes genres that have a broader application (letters and emails, reviews, argumentative essay). As such, Wren is designed to provide relevant materials for the kinds of writing that students often need to produce as part of the formal requirements of their studies, and also text types that they may need to use in other contexts (e.g. a film review, a formal email, or a letter of complaint). For each of the genres, attention is paid to the conventional aspects of the text type, ranging from structure and lay-out through to register and functional phrases. The purpose of Wren is to help you acquire the necessary knowledge of each genre, alongside the skills common across genres, so that you will be able to produce effective, persuasive, well-structured examples of your own.

In each chapter of Core Skills and Genres the guidance and theory provided is supported by a series of exercises to facilitate practice. On purchasing Wren you will be given online access via a unique code to the answer key for the exercises. The same code will also give you access to the audio materials used in several of the chapters. The final chapter of the book, Expression, looks at common lexical and grammatical difficulties that Dutch speakers often encounter when writing in English. This is further supported by a concise section on punctuation in English texts.

Acknowledgements

Core Skills

CHAPTER 1
Note-taking

He listens well who takes notes. – Dante Alighieri

INTRODUCTION

Note-taking is a skill that is seldom taught formally in schools or colleges, yet it is a key writing skill. In higher education notes taken during lectures often form an important part of the materials to be studied for examinations. Similarly, notes taken from written sources can be of vital importance when preparing to write an essay, report or dissertation. Moreover, note-taking is an important skill in the workplace where the accurate transfer of information from, say a meeting, presentation or report, makes an important contribution to effective communication.

At a basic level note-taking might be seen as simply a means to record relevant information from a spoken or written text in a condensed form, and it is often regarded as simply a preparatory stage on the road to producing a finished text such as an article, report or essay. The activity is often conducted in an ad-hoc fashion in which the notes are written rapidly in a linear structure as the student struggles to record as much information as possible. Text (a) below shows an excerpt from notes taken on a talk about Skype technology. The writer has attempted to write in full sentences, there is little in the way of abbreviation and the question marks indicate missing content that the writer did not pick up. In addition it is not clear how the different pieces of information relate to each other, for example which points are the main points?

(a)

The notes shown in (a) indicate a notion of note-taking as a form of 'normal' writing, only speeded up. However, note-taking is not simply recording information at speed, it is a complex process that involves the simultaneous execution of a number of skills:

- listening/reading in a suitably focused manner, grasping main points
- comprehension of the materials in terms of content, structure
- deciding which information to prioritise
- writing in structured abbreviated forms.

Appreciating this complexity is an important step towards developing sound note-taking skills. Moreover, efficient note-taking is not only an aid to memory, a way of recording information, it is also an aid to understanding.

In example (b) below a student has taken notes on a talk about computer generated imagery. The text is less linear than (a) in its structure, and it is clear that the writer has attempted to situate the information within a clear visual structure that includes thematic blocks and enumerations. Also, the circled labels clarify the linking argument or narrative behind the main points. This then is a more successful example of note-taking than (a) but we can note that while some symbols are used, such as arrows and dashes, there is little in terms of abbreviation.

(b)

In this first chapter the aim is to provide a range of sensible approaches and ideas on selecting relevant information (*What to note down*) and recording that information efficiently (*How to note it down*).

It is important to point out here that the various approaches and techniques shown are suggestions rather than `rules´. Your notes will usually be for your own use and so how you carry out the task is a matter of your own preferences, as long as you achieve a set of notes that represents the material in a way that is clear to you. Take the elements below that work for your particular style of note-taking and seek to develop a simple and reliable method of structuring and condensing information. And it is worth remembering that the skills you develop in this respect will be valuable during your academic studies and beyond in professional workplace settings.

1.1 WHAT SHOULD I NOTE DOWN?

Do not try to get everything down. You should aim to record the information that is **relevant to your purpose**, which means that you have to be clear about why you are reading/listening to a particular text. If for example your task is to write a summary or to note down the contents of a lecture, you should listen for the main points and try to understand how those points relate to each other. Also, specific information such as definitions, statistics and examples may also be necessary information. In contrast to these purposes you may need to focus on specific kinds of information rather than the main points, for example examining several articles on climate change looking for specific mentions of deforestation. Being clear about the purpose of reading / listening to a given text is, then, the first filter you should apply.

When reading

When taking notes from a written text it is useful to **skim** and **scan** the text. You skim to rapidly gain an overall sense of the text paying attention to the title, introduction and key (topic) sentences in the paragraphs. In a well structured text each paragraph will have a sentence that expresses the main item or idea tackled in that particular paragraph. This is the topic sentence and will be dealt with in greater detail in Chapter 3 (3.3) and Chapter 6. Locating such sentences (they are often the first sentence) when skimming allows you to quickly build an impression of the main elements of the text´s description or argument.

Scanning is used to quickly locate specific items of content relevant to your purpose. As with skimming you can use section titles and topic sentences to rapidly navigate your way through the text, but the emphasis is on finding particular pieces information rather than on gaining an overview of the text.

Such reading strategies are much more efficient ways of extracting the relevant information that will be recorded in your notes. If you own your own copy of a text then the addition of brief notes and descriptions in the margins can help to condense the information. However, again you should be clear on the purpose. Are you providing your own subjective commentary on the material or are you seeking to neutrally distil the main point(s) in each paragraph?