

Academic writing / Department of Social Sciences and Philosophy (YFI)

An overview of academic writing

The writing process and assignments

The text to be written, as well as its features, depend on the course. Written assignments as part of course requirements are different for every course, so their instructions naturally differ as well. Sometimes the assignment is defined precisely and students should follow the instructions carefully. However, the instructions can also be broad, and it is each student's responsibility to independently limit the topic, structure the text, and choose the material and sources – to plan and implement the work as a whole. In any case, you should familiarise yourself with the assignment instructions carefully.

The style and form of academic writing can vary in the instructions. For example, the form of an essay and a research report is different. If nothing else has been specified, you are expected to write in a formal style and follow the general conventions of academic writing. In an academic text, you express your reflections based on the studied content and individual reasoning. You refer to other authors in the text and differentiate your own conclusions from the things other authors have said. The presented statements must be duly justified, the descriptions and explanations based on evidence, and the work must comply with the conventional structure of academic texts. In practice, the conventions of academic writing are introduced in the so-called UVK studies (new, integrated structures for communication and language courses) that begin at the Language Centre in the first year of studies.

Especially later in their studies, students are supposed to be independently responsible for their progress. Academic experts are expected to be able to write different texts for different audiences and purposes. More formal texts are written for conference publications, scientific journals and books; sometimes texts are also written for a wider audience and more informal forums. The style must be adapted to the text type and the intended audience.

University courses include a wide range of written assignments. A lengthy piece of writing may take much of your time and require reflection as well as assimilation and understanding of the studied content. Some written assignments are processed at, for example, seminars. There the text is created gradually and the work method can be characterised as process writing. In practice, you write texts independently and they are handled in the group. In the first text you, for instance, may formulate a research idea. In later versions, you focus on structure, more thorough handling of earlier research, text polishing, and so on.

No one is a perfect writer, and one can always get practice in writing. Academic writing is studied and practised particularly at the beginning of university studies. You can support your writing by using guides intended for that purpose (e.g. [Bailey, Stephen](#) (2006): *Academic writing: a handbook for international students*. Creme, Phyllis & Lea, Mary R. (2008): *Writing at university: a guide for students*

If you have questions about instructions or other aspects related to assignments, please contact your course teacher. Teachers also give feedback if you want. Feedback is worth asking for especially if you are insecure about writing or, for example, want to discuss course

assessment. The teacher also guides and helps you if you have problems with course completion. However, studying is your own responsibility, and you should take care of such things as the content of your assignments and returning assignments in time.

The guidelines for master's theses at YFI

(<https://www.jyu.fi/hytk/fi/laitokset/yfi/en/studies/guidelines-for-studying/masters-thesis/masters-thesis-guidelines-yfi-2014.pdf>) provide basic information on, for example, the layout of research reports and general guidelines for referencing practices. Applicable parts of these guidelines can also be used for bachelor's theses.

Jyväskylä University Library provides various tools to support your studies:

Library Tutorial (<https://koppa.jyu.fi/avoimet/kirjasto/kirjastotuutori>).

The academic writing courses and online materials of the University Language Centre and the Library are worth utilising throughout your studies: <https://kielikeskus.jyu.fi/>
<https://kirjasto.jyu.fi/tiedonhaku/kirjaston-ops>

Source material and how to use it

Sources are usually scientific publications, articles and books, but they can also include, for example, classics of academic literature. They are handled by analysing and reflecting on their content. Your attitude towards your sources should not be dogmatic but critical.

On some courses, the sources and/or material to be used have been specified in advance. Even then it is recommended that you familiarise yourself independently with other sources as well. Dictionaries and reference books are useful when you familiarise yourself with the subject matter. Keep in mind, in particular, that such sources as Wikipedia and The Bank of Finnish Terminology in Arts and Sciences are not scientific sources. In other words, even when you find information on Wikipedia, you must ultimately use its original source. A good general piece of advice is that the source should be available in the University Library collections or in a collection from which the University Library orders it. The information seeking services of the University Library are provided by experienced information specialists, so they are worth using if your own information retrieval skills are not sufficient.

The database of the University of Jyväskylä: <https://jyu.finna.fi/Browse/Database>

The basic principle in writing is that the reader must know the origin of every sentence in the work – and this origin is either a source/material or the author's independent thinking. All sources must be indicated with references. The author's own thinking must be clearly identifiable in the text, and arguments must be given to validate it. The accepted conventions for referencing must be followed.

In principle, the aim is that you present the content of a source in your own words. It is not enough to replace words with their synonyms. Sometimes, however, it may be reasonable to use direct quotations. Then it must be clearly indicated that they are direct quotations. Short direct quotations are enclosed in quotation marks. Direct quotations longer than three lines are usually indented and written as separate paragraphs. They are written precisely in the original form, including potential typos. If needed, you can highlight a specific part of the quotation, but you must indicate that you have done it.

See the instructions for citing on the Library Tutorial:

<https://koppa.jyu.fi/avoimet/kirjasto/kirjastotuutori/lahteet-hallintaan/lahteet-viittaukset/nain->

[viittaat](https://koppa.jyu.fi/avoimet/kirjasto/en/library-tutorial/citing-and-managing-references/citing-and-managing/how-to-cite). (<https://koppa.jyu.fi/avoimet/kirjasto/en/library-tutorial/citing-and-managing-references/citing-and-managing/how-to-cite>) The main referencing style at YFI is so-called APA style, which is used if nothing else is specified (see the preceding link).

Academic fraud and plagiarism

Ethical writing is part of the core content of university studies. It is of primary importance to read the instructions related to plagiarism and academic fraud in order to avoid the unintentional use of unethical practices. See related instructions for the University of Jyväskylä in the following links:

<https://opiskelu.jyu.fi/fi/koulutuspalvelut/ohjeet/vilppi-ja-plagiointi>

Title page, abstract, table of contents, list of references

Written assignments (unless otherwise instructed) must include a title page, an abstract, a list of contents, and a list of references. In addition, they may include appendices. Page numbers are given.

Title page

- title of the assignment
- course code and name
- number of credits for the assignment
- student's name, date of birth (without the last part of the personal identity code) and email address
- student's major subject, specialisation or equivalent
- date
- name of the teacher in charge of the course and of assessing the assignment

A list of contents is created if the assignment includes subsections. Subsections are usually necessary in texts longer than a few pages.

The *list of references* must include all the used sources. See how to formulate the references in the list: <https://koppa.jyu.fi/avoimet/kirjasto/en/library-tutorial/citing-and-managing-references/citing-and-managing/how-to-cite>

Text layout

The basic font type is either Times New Roman or Times. Font sizes and spacing are as follows:

Font size:

- Main headings 16
- Subheadings 14
- Text 12
- Footnotes 10

Spacing:

- Text 1½

- Footnotes 1
 - Tables, indents and figure captions 1 or 2 (you can follow the example of publications in your discipline)
 - Abstract 1
- Margins
- Top and bottom margins 2.5 cm
 - Left margin 3 cm
 - Right margin 2.5 cm
- Page size: A4 (not Letter)
Leave one blank line between paragraphs.

Please see detailed instructions in the master's thesis guidelines:

<https://www.jyu.fi/hytk/fi/laitokset/yfi/en/studies/guidelines-for-studying/masters-thesis/masters-thesis-guidelines-yfi-2014.pdf>

Submission of written assignments

Assignments are returned according to the instructions given by the teacher. You can return them via the Moodle or Koppa systems and sometimes as an email attachment or in paper format. PDF format is recommended for electronic submission. If nothing else has been specified, the file name should include at least the course code and your name. You should save a copy of the assignment for unexpected situations.

Return the assignment by the deadline specified by your teacher. Assignments are usually assessed within two weeks from the deadline, but courses may also have different practices. Holidays and peak periods may also cause delays. Please note that if an assignment is the last one required for your degree and you are planning to graduate by a specific date, you must return the assignment in good time to leave enough time for assessment.

Different assignments and study practices

Exam

Exams come in all shapes and sizes. Usually they take from two to four hours. In some exam types (timed online exams), you may use materials, but there are usually no materials in e-exams.

When you prepare for an exam, remember that the aim is not to memorise the content mechanically or try to repeat it as such. The aim is to perceive and understand the handled subject matter and to be able to critically evaluate the content.

In the exam, it is important to follow the assignment instructions. Essay-based questions are most common in the exams of YFI. You can be asked to, for example, define concepts, summarise larger entities, apply a theory to a given material, or solve other tasks involving scientific thinking.

In an essay-based exam, you are expected to write a relatively short essay on a given topic. The topic of the essay is given either in question form or as a heading. A good essay answer is a well-structured entity that reflects the respondent's holistic understanding of the topic and its content.

Essay answers are divided into paragraphs. In the introductory paragraph, you briefly introduce or define the topic to be handled. The actual body paragraphs are divided according to the handled area. Finally, you present your own comments and the implications and new questions arising from your findings in the concluding paragraph.

Listing unrelated facts using, for example, dashes is not accepted in an essay answer (even though lists may sometimes constitute part of an essay). In organising your essay, it is important to stick to the point: a respondent who has understood the essential issue does not start telling long, irrelevant stories.

The exam answer should demonstrate that you are familiar with the exam material. Your answer should thus include the issues in the material that are essential from the perspective of the exam question. Knowing the learning material is the minimum requirement for a good exam answer. Mere presentation of personal opinions, even excellent ones, on the topic is not enough to pass the exam. In addition to knowing the learning material, you must demonstrate that you understand the theme of the question. Understanding is reflected in, for example, the ability to organise and apply the things learned and to relate them to other data. You do not need to agree with the lecturer or author. You can also present your own views on the matter, but you need to justify them.

The assessment criteria of exam answers focus on content knowledge as well as the ability to handle the topic of the question. The latter criterion becomes more important as your studies progress. When comparing the requirement levels of basic, intermediate and advanced studies, you should remember that the requirements increase cumulatively: in advanced studies, you must demonstrate more profound and extensive understanding of the subject matter than at earlier stages of your studies. An answer that has earned an excellent grade in basic studies may only receive a satisfactory grade in intermediate studies and a fail in advanced studies. In basic studies, you are required to understand the basic ideas and concepts of the content. In intermediate studies, you must additionally master the reasoning and connections of different views. In advanced studies, you demonstrate your ability to critically analyse contents in a broader context.

It is important to organise your answer so that it progresses fluently. Good answers are written in good formal style and demonstrate the ability to critically analyse and evaluate what has been read. The grade is not based on the length of the answer. You should not try to extend your answer artificially, even though it is true that a very short answer may not convince the examiner that you have mastered the issue. Remember that your essay answer will be read by the examiner, so your handwriting should be clear.

Essay

When planning to write an essay, please contact the teacher in charge of the course (unless instructed otherwise) and agree on writing the essay. An essay is a small-scale, inquiry-based and reflective piece of writing on a given subject area. The length of essays varies depending on the course. In essay writing, it is important to have a clear overall idea of the topic and to use your own words to express your view on the topic. The aim is to demonstrate that you understand the content and to apply the knowledge you have acquired.

The sources of citations are mentioned in the essay text immediately after the citations. Do not use direct quotations (i.e. copy text directly from books) but present the matter in your own words. An essay is based on source material that authors examine in their individual

styles. An essay should not include unfounded opinions. Instead, you should present your views as meticulous arguments on the subject area, relating them to the source literature.

An essay is usually based on at least three or four sources. All course literature is usually covered with an essay. It is recommended to read other relevant literature as well. Courses can be completed with one or more essays.

In relation to topic choice, it is good to clarify the perspective by formulating a research problem and specifying the basic concepts: What questions do I try to answer in the essay? What do the key concepts of the essay mean? Try to develop an idea for your essay before contacting the teacher. Limit the topic according to the extent of the work – excessive broadness easily makes the text superficial and fragmented.

The order in which you write an essay is often not the final order. Already when you read the source material, it is helpful to write down questions, ideas and interesting arguments – information that interests you and helps focus or answer your question. At this stage, you should not be too critical about your writing because the ideas produced in the writing process may turn out to be unsuitable for the final version.

In the final text, go straight to the point. You can best capture the reader's interest by addressing the central questions of the essay at once. That is how the research approach, questions and tensions are presented to the reader right at the beginning of the text. The handled issues must be connected to each other to make the text progress in a logical way. Successive sentences and paragraphs should be naturally linked to each other, and the common thread should bring the reader fluently through the whole essay.

Before submitting your essay, check whether it progresses logically, whether you have answered the assigned questions, and whether the text is a coherent whole. Avoid repetition, gaps and ambiguities as well as unfounded opinions. Finally, make sure that the essay title and content correspond to each other and that formatting issues from the title page to references are in order. The list of references must include all the sources that have been used.

The length of an essay is usually from 10 to 15 text pages / 5 ECTS credits or 700 words / 1 ECTS credit.

Lecture/learning diary

The purpose of writing a lecture diary (or journal) is to practise critical, reflective thinking. It is not a summary of lectures or course material but presents and comments on the central themes handled. Furthermore, a lecture diary does not equal lecture notes because it involves summarising, highlighting the things you regard as important, processing and commenting. Everything presented on the lecture is not intended to be handled in the diary. Follow your teacher's instructions on the format of the lecture diary.

Essential in writing a lecture diary is structuring, meticulous and analytical commenting (on both teaching and potential discussions), and reflecting on and justifying presented arguments. The comments can be critical, supplementary, approving, reflecting, interpreting or experiential, based on observed phenomena or life experiences, for example.

A lecture diary requires commitment and regular attendance at lectures. To have at least a satisfactory grade for a lecture diary, you must demonstrate that you have understood and

absorbed the most essential issues related to the course objectives. Superficial treatment, mere summaries of the lecturer's words, content errors, irrelevant comments or unfounded opinions will lower the grade.

There is no general model for a lecture diary, but the following guidelines can usually be applied:

- A) You can first summarise the lecture in one paragraph and thereafter write one to two paragraphs of comments, etc., on the summary.
- B) The lecture diary can be a more "essay-like", logically progressing prose diary that focuses on a more limited amount of handled topics.

If no other instructions on length have been given, you can apply the following rule of thumb: write one to one-and-a-half pages of text for a two-hour lecture. Write in formal academic style.

In some courses, you are assigned to write a learning diary. The idea of a learning diary is mainly the same as that of a lecture diary. However, instead of lectures, a learning diary is based on other sources or materials specified by the teacher.

Reading circle / study group

These instructions apply to reading circles that students have independently organised. A reading circle (or study group) is a group learning process, in which a group of students gathers to discuss previously chosen literature based on an introduction. If the reading circle is part of course completion, the students agree on it in advance with the teacher in charge of the course. A work plan including the group members' basic information (name and email address) is emailed to the examiner. A reading circle can also be organised without aiming at course completion (i.e., for general education purposes).

As an alternative to individual learning, a reading circle is a method that enables collaborative learning. The reading material can include exam books that are part of the degree requirements, or participants can deepen their competence by reading material not included in the requirements. In addition to exams, essays and seminar works, a reading circle allows you to demonstrate your learnedness and thus diversify your modes of study.

A reading circle is not necessarily the easiest way to complete your studies, but at its best, it motivates you and promotes your learning.

This form of learning calls for commitment and teamwork skills. It develops your conversation skills as well as reading techniques. Overall, sharing your thoughts with other students helps you organise your thoughts and enhances your ability to master large entities. A successful reading circle is an excellent way to understand and solve problems together. The course topics are studied by discussing them together.

The literature is divided among the participants and read carefully. At this stage, it is already good to reflect on good, central themes for an introduction. The participants agree on the topics and schedules of their introductory presentations. Each of them writes an introduction of about five to six pages on a chosen work. The introductions should not be summaries but critical, conversation-inspiring reflections on the central themes of the books. It is worthwhile to attach a few questions and proposals for discussion topics at the end of the introduction, which will make it easier to start discussion in the reading circle.

A reading circle meets as many times as necessary (e.g. five times), depending on the number of participants, the scope of themes handled, and the idea of the reading circle. Enough time and a peaceful meeting place should be used to create an atmosphere that promotes learning. The room should be carefully chosen because it is crucial for the atmosphere in the circle.

Every session begins with an introduction of 15 to 30 minutes. Copies of the written introductions are either printed in advance or emailed in good time to each participant. Because all group members have read the introduction in advance, there is no need to read aloud the introduction at the meeting. It is in every way more reasonable that the author of the introduction presents the book under discussion freely, commenting on problematic issues and perhaps making additional remarks on the introduction distributed in advance.

The author of the introduction acts as chair at the meeting and leads discussion after the introduction. The chair is in charge of focusing discussion on the theme and maintaining the continuity of the discussion. The chair should also try to involve all group members actively in the discussion. The discussions should address only specific questions related to the discipline, and informal chatting should be avoided.

Written minutes are created to document each discussion. The minutes are written by the secretary – a role held by each group member in turn. The minutes must detail both background information (topic, participants, time of the meeting) and the discussion itself: the general progress of discussion, its themes and main points, what problems were not solved, where opinions conflicted, and so on. Please note that the discussions and introductions must demonstrate that you have really familiarised yourself with course literature.

After the reading circle, all introductions and transcribed minutes are submitted to the examiner, who is entitled (but not obliged) to invite the group to a common feedback discussion. The examiner assesses the group's performance based on the introductions, minutes, and a potential final discussion.

Written assignment

Based on curricula, some courses are completed through written assignments. These assignments can be similar to the aforementioned essay, but they can also be something else. Because assignment types vary, no common guidelines can be given – the instructions above are applied according to the teacher's specifications.

An assignment can be, for example, as follows:

- Writing an encyclopaedia-type article whose length can vary from a compact 100-word entry to a longer text of two to three pages (e.g. https://assets.cambridge.org/97805216/37220/excerpt/9780521637220_excerpt.pdf).
- A wiki article on a specified topic
- A blog text (e.g. <https://blog.oup.com/>)
- Creation of learning material; teaching is a good way to learn, and the assignment could be planning how you would teach a subject area to someone else and produce its learning material, which could also include other material in addition to text.
- A written introduction as a basis for discussion; or a presentation and related material.
- Data analysis: for example, on a methodology course, the assignment can involve analysing data with relevant methods.