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SOME PRELIMINARIES

In this first chapter, we have an assortment of 'tasters' that need to be borne in mind when approaching coursework assignments. We begin by examining the different needs of essays and lab reports. It is important to be aware of the contrasting aims of these two major types of assignment. You also need to understand what type of writing is needed in psychology. For example, do psychologists like to put quotations in their writing? Are there any underlying assumptions that distinguish it from other disciplines? We will also consider the importance of making satisfactory preparations, including discussing whether it is better to write on paper or to use a computer. The final part considers 10 different ways to get your writing started.

Essays and Lab Reports

While essays and lab reports have many similarities, it is important to know the different expectations for each. Let's begin with the essay. The essay is as an exercise to find out our skill in examining a particular issue relevant to psychology. This means that we are going to study a controversy or subject area and analyse the available evidence. This needs an assimilation of the evidence and the construction of an argument to support our analysis. We want to produce a work that interests the reader and one with a coherent structure that will be easy to understand.

The aim of the essay setter is not only to see how well writers can examine an issue, but also to see how skilled the writers are in expressing themselves. To achieve this the writer needs a good plan of the essay structure. One needs to show skills in self-expression as well as displaying good critical appraisal of the

research that is being described. The language should be precise, have a continuous flow, be free from ambiguities and modern in style.

Writing up the lab report involves different processes. The report presents a particular research problem and the aims of the experiment with specific hypotheses. It then describes the research that has been undertaken in enough detail that anyone else could perform the same experiment. This is followed by an analysis of the findings and a discussion of these findings in the context of the earlier hypotheses in the report.

Clearly, this is research not undertaken in isolation. There are invariably findings from other psychologists that have a bearing on these hypotheses. The introductory section is the place to describe this work. The writer returns to other work in the discussion as the new findings from the current experiment are assimilated into the existing body of knowledge. The report then reaches a conclusion.

There are, of course, similarities and contrasts between the two types of assignment. For example, they are similar in that both need good organisation, which includes an introduction and a conclusion, and the writing needs to be logical, clear and concise. However, there are also contrasts. The essay involves a description and assessment of other people's research work, whereas the lab report incorporates your own research. This consists of a limited research exercise to study a particular hypothesis or hypotheses. Another contrast is that the area of study in a practical report is usually narrowly focused. An essay can afford to take a more general look at a particular question.

Problems with lab reports and essays

There may be a few areas of difficulty with the lab report. (However, don't worry as these problems are all surmountable.) For example, one of these problems is how to create a hypothesis, which is dealt with in detail in chapter 3.

Let me pause for a moment to explain that in this book, I will have a conversation with a (usually polite) fictional student (yes, I have a split personality) and here is the first question:

> *Student:* Suppose that I run my experiment and the actual result is completely different from my initial hypothesis: I was anticipating a difference between two groups, but actually found no significant difference between them. Do I therefore change my hypotheses in my introduction and state that no difference is expected between the two groups?

John: You have my sympathy if this happens to you. Suppose that from your reading you find that previous research suggested that a difference between the two groups would have been expected. It would look odd in your introduction if you then stated that you were expecting no difference between the two groups.

There is no point in leaving out relevant evidence from the research literature (indicating that a difference would be expected) in your introduction either. This would be unethical and the marker will probably know about that research anyway. Instead, use this evidence to build up a case to put forward the hypothesis that a difference is expected. Then in the discussion explain that the hypothesis has unexpectedly not been confirmed. **"**

Continuing this discussion, you may wonder why you can get unexpected results in your own research. This is something that just happens. If results always came out as expected, psychology would be a dull science. Unfortunately getting an unexpected result this way can be difficult to explain.

It could be that your non-significant result is the correct one, and later researchers may publish similar non-significant results. In other words, the finding of a significant difference by a previous researcher may simply have been a chance result. On the other hand, if there had been many more participants in experiments that had previously found a difference, it is more likely that you have just got a fluke result. Another possibility for discussion is that your experimental design is slightly different from previous research. Could this change account for the different result?

Writing an essay also has challenges. One of the most important of these is being sure the essay you are planning to write is going to answer the question. One concern may be that you are not covering all the areas the marker requires. Another is that you might think the title is ambiguous. If so, get in touch with the essay setter for more help. We will go into much more detail about essay writing in the next chapter.

" *Student:*   How can I squeeze all this information in my essay and still come up with a product that is going to get a high mark?
John: It is important to learn to express yourself concisely and still leave room in the essay to provide sufficient analysis of the issues involved. **"**

The Importance of Preparation

Preparation for the longer term

'Sharpen the saw' is a phrase meaning that preparation can save effort. When a woodcutter tries to cut wood with a blunt saw it takes a tremendous amount of effort and time. By contrast, if the saw is first sharpened, the wood can be cut through much more easily and in a fraction of the time. According to Covey (1989), people often go about their work without sharpening the saw, because they think that they are just too busy. Nevertheless, if they found the time to perform the kind of task represented by this simple operation, they would create more time and subsequently work much more efficiently.

Applying the sharpening principle

How would this principle be useful for you coursework assignments? The fact that you are reading a book like this is not because you are trying to delay writing up that essay. Instead, it is saw-sharpening. By working out the best way to write assignments, you are not wasting time writing them in inappropriate ways. You will save time and avoid disappointment by finding out what is needed as soon as possible.

Another way to sharpen the saw is by improving your writing craft. Writing is a skill that can be developed. Part of that improvement comes about by reading as much as possible and noting the ways that psychologists express themselves. This can also help to improve vocabulary both in terms of word meanings and spellings. This is an efficient saw-sharpening activity because it means that in the future less time will be spent looking up words in the dictionary, and more importantly you will not be interrupted mid-sentence while hunting around for the best word. If you do find yourself trying to think of a suitable word, leave a blank. Alternatively highlight a word of nearly the same meaning and just continue writing and return later. This is better than breaking off from a train of thought.

Learning how to reference is saw-sharpening. Learning about how psychologists format their work and lay out their references should save time by reducing the need to rearrange or correct references. Learn to touch-type so that you can look directly at the screen while you type. This is also saw-sharpening.

Regular saw-sharpening is better

As with all such advice, take this in the way that is most suitable for your situation. If one is 3 days away from an essay deadline, it would be foolhardy to start working to improve word power. Get down to writing that essay immediately

and drop everything else to get it handed in on time. Saw-sharpening is for the longer term, but should be integrated into the daily routine, to give a real sense of making definite progress over time. Do not use saw-sharpening as an excuse for not getting on with more urgent assignments.

Preparation for the shorter term

Planning your time
Link your short-term goals to your forthcoming assignment deadlines. This means planning carefully so enough time is spent on each assignment. If time is tight, you will have to give up some leisure time to get everything done. If time is not so tight, plan suitable rest times for doing other activities.

Getting the evidence
When the assignment details are given out, first think about the exact requirements of the topic. Then hunt around for suitable material to provide background reading. This would include going to general textbooks, encyclopaedias, books in the library, accessing the web, and accessing databases such as PsycINFO and Web of Science. It would also be useful to look up the topic and associated terms in a psychology dictionary.

This should not imply mindlessly gathering information like a squirrel. Get down to learning and understanding your topic. It can be helpful to talk to friends about the topic, especially as it can mean explaining technical topics in a way that they can understand. Work out the issues involved and evaluate strengths and weaknesses. This will improve further reading as it will provide more focus.

You need to be focused during this search. Although reading material that is 'off topic' will help with general knowledge about psychology, it is not going to help to get that background reading completed. You need to be disciplined with yourself if this leads to too much time-wasting. Engaging with the topic will develop a positive mindset. Work out why the topic question could be interesting and go from there.

Planning your assignment
You then need to think about the structure of your essay or lab report. Some like to think of a structure immediately without any further reading, while others prefer to do some background reading to get a 'feel' for the topic before starting on the planning stage. It does not matter which way you advance, as the plan is likely to be adjusted as work progresses. Nevertheless, it is important to have a plan to direct these activities and to act as a reminder about what has to be done next.
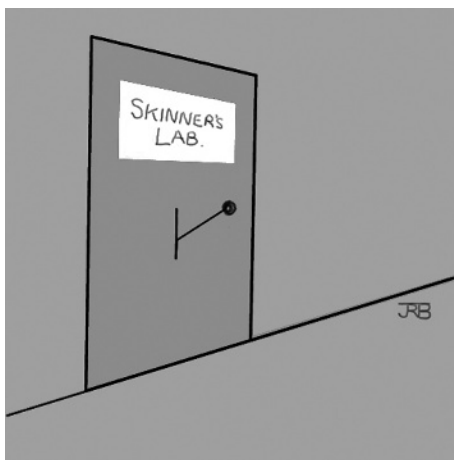
How Psychologists Write

The approach of most academic disciplines

Each academic discipline has its own philosophy and writing style. However, most of these different academic styles have the common element that the writing style is formal. This is in contrast to chatty informal writing, as when writing a letter or sending an e-mail to a friend. For example, psychologists would not write: 'The student didn't choose the right one'. We do not use *contractions* such as 'don't', 'it's', 'there's' and so on.

Informal or colloquial writing is a habit that some students find difficult to shake off. If you cannot help writing this way, at least go back and edit your chatty style afterwards to make it suitably formal. A handy tip is to do a computer search for a single quote (') to find contractions such as 'can't' afterwards.

> *Student:*   But you haven't written this book in a formal style; for example there are occasional contractions. You're not setting a very good example.
> *John:*   I'm sure the odd book reviewer will enjoy pointing this out as well! However, in this book I aim to explain in a friendly, approachable way how to write well in psychology. It is not in itself a technical report or academic essay.

We also write concisely. We would not write, as one student did for me in an abstract, '…it was therefore decided to explore this effect by presenting

participants with …' Instead, we might write, 'Participants were therefore given …'. Writers in psychology write formally for an audience that expects the writing to be concise.

Our writing should also be unambiguous and have continuity. Some examples of avoiding ambiguity in certain words can be found in chapter 11 (e.g. see the entry for *since*), but ambiguity can also be created by using fuzzy descriptions. Turning to continuity, there is the expectation that there should be a logical progression in the arguments that are presented. In practice, this is not always going to be easy: sometimes blocks of information must be included that do not need to be placed in any particular order.

In the scientific disciplines, including psychology, there are more assumptions and the writer is expected to be aware of them. For example, this includes formulating hypotheses and testing them by experimentation. All academic disciplines discourage broad, unsupported statements. Thus if a statement is made, experimental evidence with the names of the investigators (and years) needs to back that statement.

Students can get into difficulty when discussing these hypotheses in relation to the experimental outcomes. They might refer (mistakenly) to a hypothesis being 'proved' by their experimental result. This implies that the evidence has settled the truth of the matter. However, the scientific endeavour is about approaching the truth about the world. We cannot be certain, based on one experiment, or even several experiments, that we have reached our goal. Instead, we should write that the hypothesis was *confirmed*, *supported*, *substantiated* or some equivalent term. There will be more on this topic in chapter 3.

The approach of psychology

Over the years in psychology we have developed our own notion about what is acceptable writing. An important facet of our discipline is that we have a scientific approach, but this orientation is tailored to our particular requirements. This means that we develop hypotheses and test them, just as in other scientific disciplines. In contrast to a discipline such as chemistry, our interest is not in inert substances, but in living participants, who need to be treated accordingly. We often refer to people taking part in our experiments as 'participants', rather than 'subjects', as we want to treat such people with respect.

There have been other gradual changes in the way that we write in psychology, reflected partly by the changes in attitudes within our society. We now try to avoid any hint of prejudice and bias in our writing. For example, we avoid sexism. Thus, the participant was not '… told to press the key with *his* preferred hand'. Instead, participants '… were asked to use *their* preferred hand to press

the key'. This avoidance of sexism is a two-way process and means avoiding sexism against men as well, such as by continual reference to *she* without the corresponding *he*. The greatest difficulty in removing sexist language is avoiding the use of third person pronouns such as he or she. Occasionally they may need to be bundled together as 'he or she' (see the entry for *s/he* in chapter 11).

Similarly, we should be careful not to cause offence to any individual with any particular characteristic. As an example, we should not write 'A group of 9- and 10-year-old dyslexics were tested on the reaction time task.' The experimenter here is testing a group of children who happen to have a condition called dyslexia. The identity of these young people is not their dyslexia. A more suitable way might be 'A group of children aged 9 to 10 years diagnosed with dyslexia were tested …'. Try also to be sensitive to the use of colour terms, as they may be construed to be similar to skin colour, so avoid terms such as 'pure white' and so on. However, political correctness has to be treated sensibly and should not go to such laughable lengths as 'Snow White and the Seven Vertically Challenged People'. The main criterion is whether the term you are using is likely to cause someone somewhere embarrassment or offence.

Because of our scientific ideals, we are concerned with being 'objective' when collecting data. (However, see chapter 5 on the qualitative report for a different perspective.) In other words, we should focus on our hypotheses, rather than refer to our personal views, and try to express ourselves in formal objective language. Although these objectives are laudable, it has sometimes led to prose that is dry to read. Now a slightly more relaxed approach is considered suitable, with the writer being allowed to express views more directly.

An aspect of scientific writing in the past was its excessive use of the passive voice. For instance, the sentence beginning 'The copper sulphate was placed in the test tube …' is in the passive voice, whereas 'The experimenter placed the copper sulphate in the test tube' is in the active voice. Expressing yourself in the active voice makes you understood more easily, but there will be situations when the passive voice will be preferable. If the grammar checker is on permanently while you write, it will usually alert you to passive constructions. But be aware that the checker does not always get it right. There is further discussion on this topic in chapter 11 (see *active vs. passive voice*). As a footnote, do not get obsessed with this aspect because when writing Method sections in particular it is very difficult to avoid writing in the passive voice.

The use of quotations (that is, when quoting written sources rather than direct speech) is an area of interesting contrasts between disciplines and within psychology. For instance, if studying history one would include quotes from authorities (leading historians) within the field of history to back up the

interpretations of historical events. In English literature academics would be expecting to see the author's quotation used by the student as a basis for a critical appraisal.

In psychology, the quotation is used far less often and the language that is used by an author to express an idea is not considered as important as the idea itself. We do find quotations used much more in student essays, but probably by students steeped in the traditions of other disciplines. As a rule of thumb, if more than 4–6 per cent of the text consists of quotes, there is probably an overuse of quotations. As a footnote, if you have been given an essay or report to write that is oriented in a qualitative way (see chapter 3 for an explanation, or chapter 5 about writing a qualitative report) then quotations will be used much more.

The Case for Writing Up Using the Computer

Should you write up directly on to your computer, or would it be better to start writing up on paper? The advantages of using a computer for your write-up are as follows:

1.   There is no final draft to type up.

One problem for those who write on paper is that time then has to be spent transcribing the whole handwritten piece on to a word processor before handing in the work.

2.   Cutting and pasting is easy.

One can keep on 'cutting and pasting' to rearrange chunks of text until satisfied with the final arrangement.

3.   Finding a keyword is quick.

Accessing any particular word in the text is fast. If you work in Microsoft Word, the control key and the 'F' key finds keywords quickly. One can also 'find and replace', meaning that if there is a need to change a word or something several times, it is easy to do (again accessible by Control + F). However, it is wise to check each individual change, rather than doing a 'universal change' in which all instances of the word are changed to something else in one push of a button.

4.   It is faster than writing by hand.

If you learn to touch-type, your typing speed should become faster than writing speed. You can type up more text without experiencing as much strain as

when you write by hand. Incidentally, it is well worth learning to touch-type. There are books available that have typing exercises as well as programs on the web to help you achieve this. The best way to start is first to do the basic exercises to learn which finger covers which keys. As soon as possible, you should then type everything by touch-typing. *Never* look at the keyboard – except perhaps for numbers. It will be agonisingly slow to begin with, but with perseverance typing speed will build up. This is an excellent saw-sharpening activity. A reasonable speed can be achieved within about 2 weeks as long as you persevere.

5. You can use dictation software.
There is software available into which one can dictate and this is simultaneously converted into text on the screen. This needs some time and effort to set up, but eventually could prove useful.

6. There is no bulky paper storage.
When typing on computer there isn't the problem of bulky paper storage; so you will find it increasingly easy to retrieve documents from your computer compared with paper storage, unless you have enough filing cabinet storage for your paper. Journal papers and other documents can be stored in PDF form on computer, which also helps speed of access.

If a computer is used, it is important to be well organised with your documents. If you use Microsoft Word, then Windows Explorer should be used for your file organisation. Each document is typed into a file and these files are stored within a folder. This allows the organisation of the files into a hierarchy. It is a good idea to limit the size of any particular folder (perhaps to 20–30 files). As the number of files increases, consider whether certain folders could be usefully subdivided. Occasionally a document may be accidentally filed in the wrong place. It is possible to do a limited search by looking up your history of document retrievals within Word (click 'File'), or a more extensive search, focusing on particular folders, by using 'Search' in Explorer.

The Case for Writing Up on Paper

Some people find it difficult to compose what they want to write directly on the computer. They prefer to plan their work and then write it out on paper and then either to redraft it or cut and paste the paper until it is in a form that is acceptable. The work is then typed in and printed off only at the final stage. There are two main advantages of this approach. First, there is flexibility in

where you write, as pen and pad are portable, and second, you can access what you have written more easily as you can lay out your sheets of paper to look at. Some disadvantages with using a computer are as follows:

1. Computers can lack flexibility in location.

If you have not got a laptop or portable device such as a PDA, you may be restricted to using the computer in one particular location.

2. Computers have a restricted field of view.

You have a restricted field of view on the screen. Printing out the text can help overcome this problem.

3. Typing is too slow to keep up with thoughts.

This is perhaps a Catch-22: because you are used to writing on paper, you are slow at typing on the computer. Therefore, some people never make a switch-over to typing.

Starting to Write: Ten Ways to Get You on Your Way

At last, you are able to start writing. Let's suppose that you have already worked at understanding what the question is asking. (There is more about how to unpack a question at the beginning of the next chapter.) Unfortunately, you have a problem starting or you have stopped soon after starting. Most of us have been there. You are looking at a blank computer screen and your mind is equally blank; but you need to write. You have to write. Suddenly you feel overwhelmingly compelled to get up and perform some trivial task that is going to waste yet more time. Do not despair. Here are 10 ways to get going:

1. Gather enough information.

Probably the most important task that can be done is to gather sufficient evidence so that there is enough to write about. If you have not found enough on the topic, it is not surprising that you are going to run out of ideas.

2. Begin by writing anything that springs to mind.

Go to your computer, or get your writing pad. Sit down and write anything that comes into your head. You might start by typing a letter to a friend or relative about what you are doing, or about a film you have seen. Anything will do. After doing this for a while, try to steer round to the topic that you have to write about and start writing about this.

3. Develop a positive mental attitude.

Do not worry at this stage if you feel that what you write is terrible. If you have this attitude, this could be why you find writing difficult. You need to convince yourself that what you are doing is acceptable and that you are doing fine. Even better – suspend that editor in your head while writing the first draft.

4. Set up a routine for writing.

For some, getting up early and writing for 2 or 3 hours each day, no matter what, is an excellent way to tackle any writing assignment. However, you do not need to cut yourself off from the world when writing, which leads on to the next point.

5. Your writing environment does not have to be perfect.

Do not use the excuse that your working space needs to be silent before you can write. As Stephen King (2000) wrote: 'At times I'm sure all writers feel the same … if only I were in the right writing environment … I just KNOW I would be penning my masterpiece' (p.279). In fact, the interruptions during writing can be helpful. As King puts it: 'It is, after all, the dab of grit that seeps into an oyster's shell that makes the pearl' (p.279). In an experiment on distraction Reisberg and McLean (1985) played tapes of the comedian Joan Rivers to participants which they had to ignore while doing the main task of adding up columns of numbers. They found that if they gave participants enough financial incentive they were able to ignore Joan and get on with the task. So imagine yourself working in the library and trying to write that essay, but you are getting distracted by that talkative, smelly, fidgeting, finger-tapping person who insists on sitting as close as possible. Remember that if you are motivated enough you should be able to ignore most happenings. But, on second thoughts, there are limits – I would go and find somewhere else to sit!

6. Do not procrastinate.

Do not even allow the luxury of any self-doubts; get down to writing straight away. We will see how getting an early draft completed well before the essay deadline will help the quality of the final product. If I want to go running on a cold winter day, I 'just do it' – I put on my kit and get out there. Similarly, when it comes to writing – just do it.

7. Take a break.

This is just the opposite of the last point and not the way to get going! The point here is that much time might have been spent on the essay and you are getting into a rut. This is a good time to take a break, either by doing something

different for a while, or by switching to another assignment for a while. That is, as long as the time is available, of course.

8.   Tackle lethargy.
Your lethargy might be simply because your room is too warm and comfortable. It could be because of a lack of sleep. You could consider embarking on an exercise programme, starting with regular walks, developing into something more strenuous. Give this continuous writing project (already suggested in point 2) a serious try every day and it could well overcome the problem.

9.   Give yourself incentives.
Do not allow yourself to watch a favourite television programme, or have any other treat, until you have achieved a sequence of set goals in your self-imposed writing assignments.

10.   Park on the slope.
The idea here comes from skiing – if you park temporarily but still on the slope, you can resume down the slope whenever you wish. Using this analogy, don't feel that you need to complete the section you are writing by the end of your session. Leave the rest of a section unwritten, or if you do complete it go on to make a start on the next section. This way you can pick up from where you left off the next day and carry on down that slope. In other words, finish that uncompleted section and go on to the next. Incidentally, just in case someone is planning to sue me, this is not actually a good tip for skiing as you might find that your skis have gone the next morning.

Chapter Summary

We began this chapter by considering the two major types of assignment in psychology: the essay and the lab report. Both have their problems, but these are surmountable. All academic essays in most disciplines, including psychology, involve writing a discussion and argument around a topic in a more formal language than that used in everyday speech. However, psychology has its own distinctive approaches to academic problems that need to be recognised by students. One common mistake of the beginner is to imagine that academic writing needs to include many quotations from leading authorities. Psychologists usually are not so much concerned with how other psychologists express themselves, but more about other people's findings, interpretations and theories. We also discussed the importance of developing suitable skills for

essay writing, using the analogy of 'sharpening the saw'. In the closing part of this chapter, we discussed the advantages of writing your essay directly on your computer versus on paper. If you convert to using your computer for essay writing, this would be a good saw-sharpening activity as you will develop a skill that will make essay writing increasingly easy to fulfil. We finished by looking at 10 different ways to get you writing or to keep it going.