

# Academic writing: Frequent Errors with solutions

Compiled by Thomas Mejtoft, 2021-03-17

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## Structure

- Avoid really short paragraphs (3-4 rows), try to merge with the paragraph above or below. This increases readability!
- Read through for flow... Think about the paper as one single paragraph; does this (imaginary) single paragraph make sense?
- If different paragraphs connect to each other, make sure that there are sentences that help the reader between paragraphs and “glue” them together.
- There is no need of disposition/outline in a short paper as long as you have followed a common structure, e.g. IMRAD (in a thesis the outline is optional, but something that most students decide to have in the report).
- Use sub-headings! Let the headings be descriptive.
- Do not start a chapter etc. with a reference back to a previous chapter, big risk for dangling modifier... Repeat instead of trying to do a reference back... (e.g. “This said, it is possible to...”)
- A list (e.g. bullet points or numbered) gets attention! Think though if the content in the list deserves attention compared to other things that you write. If you want a numbered list in the text, use e.g. (1)... (2)... etc. or 1)... 2)... etc.
- Do not assume that all readers are reading every part of your paper. If it’s needed for understanding, start with repetition of the important parts in e.g. method, conclusions etc. Many readers only read the Abstract and Conclusions.
- Appendix. There is no need for an appendix in a short paper. In most cases journals and conferences do not allow appendices (in e.g. a thesis or a report the appendices should be after the references, i.e. the end of the thesis/report). In all situations when you want to use appendices, do not make the reader go back and forth to the appendix to understand the content, repeat in the text what is needed for understanding the content.

## Title

- Make the title descriptive! More people will read your title than your paper, make the readers understand what they are looking forward to.
- Subtitles might be a solution for making a title fit with the content of your paper.
  - » Subtitles are not always indexed by databases (in the case of a journal or conference paper). This means that the “most important” information would be in the head title and not in the subtitle.

## Abstract

- The abstract should be a “mini version” of your paper, including a brief introduction, the objective, a sentence or two about method and your results. Even though all parts are important, the focus should be on your results and your contribution. If not everything, at least a lot should be understood from the abstract!
- About 150-250 words make a nice abstract on a short paper (when writing a thesis, 2/3-1 page is a good length of an abstract).
- Generally, you do not use references in the abstract.

## Introduction

- Use the funnel-approach to gradually explain for the reader why your objective is important to investigate.
- Use references to prove your point. It is important to back up all (or at least most) statements in the introduction. References in your introduction makes the foundation of our paper stronger
- Have several target groups of your paper with different background? Do not forget to include all target groups of your paper in the understanding of the introduction. Everyone that you want as a reader should be able to understand and be caught by your introduction. This means that you might need to explain different things to different readers, which (usually) makes the introduction longer.

## Objective

- Avoid vague statements in the objective. Be specific and clear so the reader can easily understand what the paper is going to discuss.
- Try to find infinitive verbs for describing your objective (use Bloom's taxonomy to find the right level of complexity).
- The objective should be measurable (what should a possible conclusion sound like?)
- Avoid rhetorical questions in (or close to) the objective. Hence, only use real research questions that you are actually going to answer.
  - » ...and in general, avoid all rhetorical questions in research papers. Those tend to fit better in debate articles.
- Focus your objective at one place in the paper, do not introduce semi-objectives in other places of the paper...
  - » You can, however, introduce research questions in the introduction and. Remember that these questions should be repeated under the objective (for those that do not read the introduction). From time to time the research questions/hypothesis are structured and defined in the theory (this is more common in e.g. a thesis).
- The objective must be answered in the conclusions and have a discussion and analysis leading from the research question to your conclusions (this part should be in the 'discussion')
- Avoid open questions in the text if they are not (somehow, somewhere) answered close to the objective or in the conclusions.

## Method

- Is everything needed for the study to be understood/evaluated and (if someone wants to) repeated included in the method?
- When in time is the study conducted? Where in the world? These things are, in most cases, important for repeating the study later on. This might also be important for someone to understand your results.
- How are the *validity* and the *reliability* met in your study? Describe for the reader why your paper is valid and reliable! **This must somehow be included in the paper!**
- You need to use reference the method(s) you have used! Reference to a book on method is (usually) needed in your chapter on method! Have you read any article with similar method/study and can make a reference to that study? (In your

thesis using a figure to show how your method is structured is a great way to increase understanding)

- Try to discuss why you chosen a specific group of respondents, e.g. students (“for convenience” might be true, but try to find a better reason). What does it mean to the results if you use e.g. students? Explain the positive and negative consequences of your choice. Try to tweak it in a positive direction... “Since today’s students have high technological adoption, this study gives indications about future direction of...”.

### Results/discussion/conclusion

- The results should be “unanalyzed” and “objective”, meaning that the reader should be able to interpret the results based on her/his pre-knowledge. The analysis should be within the discussions.
- In the discussion it is important to *reference back to the theory* when analyzing and discussing your results. A good way to do this is to use the same references again in the discussion as you used in the theory/introduction etc. This strengthen a paper!
- In the conclusions, the objective should be answered. Check that this is done!

### Language, grammar & use of words

- Do not use contractions
  - » isn’t -> is not...
  - » don’t -> do not...
- Define and explain any uncommon or field specific abbreviation the first time they are used... e.g. “...a focus has been on Case Based Reasoning (CBR)...” or “...high ROI (Return of Investment) is important...”. Then use the abbreviation later in paper.
  - » Treat abstract as separate part of the paper. I.e. explain an abbreviation (if used in the abstract) both in the abstract and the first occurrence in the paper.
  - » From time to time it might be important to also explain an abbreviation in the conclusions too, since a lot of readers only read the conclusions and not the rest of the paper.
- Avoid first person (use third person passive form instead)
  - » Do not use (or at least do not overuse) concepts like I, me, we...
  - » Do not use e.g. “we”, “us” or “one” (for society, the common people, the reader, etc.), do not include the reader unintentionally in your reasoning or make general statements that are not referenced. Instead be more specific and use “in society”, “the general population” etc...
  - » Avoid referencing to the reader randomly by using “you” or “your”. In most cases, you do not know the reader and these kind of statements may backfire. This is more suitable in debate articles.
  - » If you want to use “I” (as in you that this this study and wrote the paper), then “we” is always used instead in research since research is based on others work and usually done in teams.
  - » Never fall into the trap of writing in “spoken language”, using an “I”/“we”-form makes it harder to write a formally correct language.  
In general: **Passive voice is the best (and most common) way of writing a research paper.**

- » In passive the focus the focus is on the experience and the result and not the one who perform the action, this is a better form in academic writing.
  - » Active: I classify glass as a solid.  
Passive: Glass is classified as a solid.
  - » The passive voice focuses on how glass is classified and not on who classifies glass, which in most cases are unimportant.
- Check your grammar and spelling
  - » The “is/are”-problems... find them, remove them!
  - » Third person singular!
    - » Several authors: “Mejtoft et al. [12] *suggest* that” ... (They suggest that)
    - » One author: “Mejtoft [15] *suggests* that” ... (He suggests that)
  - » Be careful for words that are different, but sound the same: where – were, knew – new, whether – weather
- In English, a period mark (“.”), instead of comma (“,”), is used for separating decimals in numbers. This is the common way in the English language, e.g. “13’000.00”, “12.4%” ... (in e.g. Swedish and many other languages a comma is commonly used for this).
- Avoid comma as thousand-separator since it can be misinterpreted in many languages as a decimal point (e.g. Swedish), especially when not using period mark at the end.
  - » The ‘ (apostrophe) or <space> is great to use for thousand-separator instead if needed, e.g. “13’000.00” or “13 000.00”.
- Read for repetitive words in same sentence or paragraph. Try to vary your language.
- If you have strong statements, e.g. “the biggest”, “the most important”, “the largest” etc., it is really important that you reference this to a source or that you can back it up with your results!
- Be consequent in your use of words throughout the paper, especially words that have been defined or might be misinterpreted by the reader.
- Do not make a reference back to the heading of the chapter in the beginning of the first sentence (if the heading is e.g. a concept or similar). I.e. do not use the heading as part of the first sentence. The heading is a separate part of the chapter. Instead repeat the text in the heading in the beginning of the sentence.
- Avoid having heading after heading without some text in-between them; this is more of a esthetical view...
- Avoid making reference between paragraphs; you might end up with people really not understanding what you reference to (sv: syftningsfel). It might be that you do not need a new paragraph and can put everything in the same paragraph or you can just repeat whatever you are referencing to in the new paragraph instead.
- **Tip of the year: Use a screen reader to listen to your own text.** For most people it is easier to hear error than to find them in text. This is a great way of finding grammatical errors!

### Figures/Tables

- Are all your figures/tables needed? Remove if they do not provide value to the paper.

- If something is put into a table, does this save space? If not, is the information in the table more important than other information listed in the paper and therefore deserves the attention of being in a table.
- Be consistent in how you display information. Information that is displayed in figures or tables tend to be more visible than information “hidden” in the text.
- If you have charts with statistics, put “n” (number of respondents) into the chart on the different questions. (e.g. “n=67”). This is a more honest approach since the reader easily can see how many have answered the question.
- Description for figure *below*; description for tables *above*!
- Both table and figures must be cross-referenced in the text. Meaning that you need to put a reference to the figure/table in the text, e.g. “The final result (Figure 1) of the project was a new...”.
- You do not have to repeat the text in the figure in the figure text. However, the figure text should give a reasonable explanation and introduction to the figure to make it understandable without reading the text in the paper.
- Avoid to reference to the figure or table as “below” or “above” use “figure X” or similar instead since that is more specific and from time to time the figures move around depending on the template and it might be hard to control what’s above or below.

### Citations, quotes and references

- Use references to prove your point!
  - » All things that are not generally known (and accepted) in society should be referenced.
  - » If you cannot find a reference to a certain thing, it might be proven by an example in the text instead...
- Do not wait to add references in the text while writing your paper, write them straight away and include page number at the start. Then it is easier to find the source when you need to look it up again...
- If you write something like “Research studies show that ...” (refer to that there are a lot of research that support your writings), more than one reference is needed! (or you can make reference to a review paper based on a lot of research)
- Changing a quote
  - » If you are writing a quote that already have quotation marks in the quote, you can (or actually must) change these quotation marks to single quotation marks (e.g. “This new ‘disruptive technology’ was adopted as a complement...”. The original quote read: This new “disruptive technology” was...)
  - » You can change the first letter between lower/upper case if it suits your need.
  - » You can remove the last period mark if it suits your need.
  - » You cannot alter the quote in any other sense!
  - » Occasionally you need to leave words out in the middle of a quote (if they are not relevant, not for altering the meaning of the quote!). To indicate that you have left some words out, use ellipsis points (three ordinary dots “...”) where the text should have been.
- If you write the name of an article/book/conference in the text; is the name really that important? Is it a seminal piece of work that makes a point in your

paper to be mentioned (instead of an ordinary reference)? Then it might be ok! Is this work more important than the other works referenced?

- If you write the name full name of an author in the text, this draws attention to this sentence. Is the attention needed? Is this author more important than other authors in the field? Is this author more important for your paper?
- Never refer to an author with first name only, not even if you know this person, last name only is preferred. If you refer to the author with “First\_name Last\_name” in the text, why do you do this, is it a super famous person within the field? Then it might be ok! Think about if this author is more important than the other authors that you made reference to?
- Introduce the reference early in the paragraph, repeat whenever needed (i.e. when the reader might think that it is a new reference, but it’s not).
- Some words demand a reference. If you are using very strong words, you need to back this up with a reference: “...is the **best** way of investigating the phenomenon”, “the best”, the most important” etc.
- References before the period mark: “... never seen before [45].”
- Space before reference: “... as been shown [7].” (i.e. between last word and reference)

## LaTeX and BibTeX

### Tips on using LaTeX:

<https://www.mejtoft.se/thomas/education/id/exjobb/latex-writing-tips/>

### Tips on using BibTeX:

<https://www.mejtoft.se/thomas/education/id/exjobb/references-using-bibtex/>

## Reference literature

### Reference literature on method and writing:

<https://www.mejtoft.se/thomas/education/reference-literature/>