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English for Academic Study

Reading, writing and speaking the English of the university — with study skills that work

Nji Griphan

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A note on this book

University success in English-medium institutions rests on academic English: reading long texts efficiently, writing structured essays and reports, listening to lectures, and speaking in seminars. This book teaches those skills directly, together with the study habits — planning, note-making, revision — that turn effort into results.

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Chapter 1

Reading Academic Texts

Academic reading is not novel-reading: you read to extract, evaluate and use. This chapter teaches the layered approach — survey, question, read, review — that lets a student take a chapter apart in an hour and keep its contents for a year.

Survey before you read

Spend five minutes first on the title, headings, introduction, conclusion, figures and summary. This builds the map onto which details will hang. Students who start at line one and push forward read everything at the same depth and remember it at the same shallowness.

Question and purpose

Turn headings into questions before reading their sections: 'What is soil erosion?' becomes the errand your eyes run while reading. Reading with a question is searching; reading without one is wandering, and the retention figures for the two are not close.

Skimming, scanning, studying

Skim for gist, scan for a named fact, study-read for mastery — three gears for three jobs. Most student reading fails by using one gear: study-reading a text that needed skimming wastes the week; skimming a text that needed studying wastes the examination.

Notes that think

Notes should compress and connect, not transcribe. Summarise each section in your own sentences, mark what you doubt, and write one question the text raised but did not answer. Notes in your own words are already half-revised; copied notes are unopened parcels.

Key points

- Survey the whole text before reading any of it deeply.
- Turn headings into questions to read with purpose.
- Summarise in your own words; mark doubts and questions.

Exercises

1. Survey a textbook chapter in five minutes and write its map from headings alone.

2. Rewrite one page of notes entirely in your own sentences.

3. Practise the three gears on one article: gist in 2 minutes, one fact by scanning, one section study-read.

Chapter 2

Academic Vocabulary and Grammar

Academic English has its own working vocabulary — words like analyse, factor, significant, whereas — and its own grammatical habits. This chapter builds both, because examiners read command of this register as command of the subject.

The academic word stock

A few hundred words do most academic work across all subjects: verbs such as demonstrate, indicate, derive; nouns such as factor, method, evidence; connectors such as however, therefore, in contrast. Learn them as families with their partners — 'conduct research', 'strong evidence' — not as lonely definitions.

Precision and hedging

Academic claims are calibrated: 'the results suggest' where evidence is partial, 'the results demonstrate' where it is strong. Hedging is not weakness; it is accuracy about certainty, and its absence — claiming proof from a suggestion — is a scholarly fault.

Sentences that carry weight

Academic sentences favour clear subjects, active verbs where honesty allows, and one main claim each. The passive has its place — methods sections report what was done — but a page of passives hides every actor, including you. Write so a tired reader at midnight cannot misunderstand you.

Paragraphs — one idea, developed

A paragraph opens with its claim (the topic sentence), develops it with evidence or reasoning, and closes by linking forward. Paragraphs of one sentence and paragraphs of one page are both failures of the same duty: to package thought in units a reader can hold.

Key points

- Learn academic words in families and partnerships.
- Hedge exactly to your evidence — no more, no less.
- One paragraph, one idea, opened by its claim.

Exercises

1. Rewrite 'the experiment proved that fertiliser is good' with accurate hedging.

2. Write a topic sentence for a paragraph about online learning.

3. Find five academic verbs in a journal article and write a sentence with each.

Chapter 3

Essays — Structure and Argument

An essay is an argument with architecture: a position stated early, developed in ordered reasons, tested against objections, and concluded without surprise. This chapter builds that architecture and the planning habits beneath it.

Answering the actual question

Underline the command words — discuss, compare, evaluate, to what extent — and the topic limits. Half of failed essays answer a neighbouring question beautifully. Your introduction should show, in its first lines, that you have understood this question and not another.

Thesis and plan

The thesis is your answer in one sentence; the plan is the order of reasons that will earn it. Plan before drafting, in headings and fragments, and let the plan be judged before prose hides its weaknesses. Ten minutes of planning saves an hour of restructuring.

Body paragraphs and evidence

Each body paragraph advances one reason, supported by evidence — a study, a figure, an example — that is cited, not merely asserted. Assertion without evidence is opinion wearing a gown; examiners can tell the difference at a glance, because they wrote the question.

Conclusions and introductions

Write the introduction last-but-one and the conclusion last. The conclusion answers the question again, now earned, states the argument's limits, and stops. New material in a conclusion is a confession that the plan failed; the place for it was the body.

Key points

- Answer the question set, not its neighbour.
- Thesis first, plan second, prose third.
- Every reason needs cited evidence.

Exercises

1. Analyse an essay title: command words, topic, limits.
2. Write a thesis sentence and a five-heading plan for it.
3. Draft one body paragraph: claim, evidence, explanation, link.

Chapter 4

Reports, Summaries and Referencing

Beyond essays, university life runs on reports, summaries and correctly referenced work. This chapter covers the report's standard anatomy, the art of the faithful summary, and referencing as an act of honesty.

The report's anatomy

Title, summary, introduction (question and purpose), methods, results, discussion, conclusions, recommendations, references. The order is a contract with the reader, who knows where everything lives. Laboratory and field reports alike keep this skeleton under every local variation.

Summarising faithfully

A summary keeps the author's claims in the author's proportions, in your words, at a fraction of the length. It adds nothing of yours — no praise, no correction; those belong in a review, clearly labelled. Faithfulness is the whole skill, and it is harder than it looks.

Referencing — the map of debts

Every borrowed fact, figure, quotation and idea carries its source, listed fully at the end. Follow your institution's style exactly — author, year, title, publisher or journal — and apply it uniformly. Referencing is how scholarship audits itself; treat it as honour, not decoration.

Quoting and paraphrasing

Quote when the words themselves matter, briefly, with quotation marks and a page reference. Paraphrase — restate fully in your own structure and words, still cited — for everything else. Changing a few words of a copied sentence is neither; it is plagiarism with light editing.

Key points

- Reports keep the standard anatomy; readers rely on it.
- A summary adds nothing of the summariser.
- Cite ideas as well as words; quote sparingly and exactly.

Exercises

1. Summarise a two-page article in 120 words, faithfully.

2. Write full references for three sources in one consistent style.

3. Paraphrase one paragraph of a textbook properly, with its citation.

Chapter 5

Listening to Lectures and Speaking in Seminars

Half of university learning arrives by ear and is tested by voice. This chapter teaches lecture listening — prediction, signposts, selective notes — and the seminar skills of presenting, questioning and disagreeing well.

Before and during the lecture

Read the topic's outline beforehand so the lecture fills a frame instead of founding one. Listen for signposts — 'three causes', 'in contrast', 'the key point is' — which announce structure; note claims and examples, not dictation, and mark the points where you were lost: those marks are your revision list.

Notes after the lecture

Within a day, expand your notes from memory first, then against the text: the attempt to recall is itself the strongest study act known. File questions that remain and ask them — in the next class, the seminar, or the lecturer's hours. Unasked questions compound like debt.

Speaking in seminars

Prepare one point and one question for every seminar; speaking early, briefly and on the topic builds the habit and the confidence together. Build on others — 'following Amina's point…' — and disagree with ideas while respecting people: 'I read that evidence differently, because…'

Presenting your work

Apply the presentation chapter of the companion computing volume: state question and answer in the first minute, one idea per slide, rehearse against the clock. Add the academic duty: name your sources aloud where your claims borrow them, and welcome questions as examination in friendly form.

Key points

- Prepare a frame before the lecture; listen for signposts.
- Expand notes from memory within a day.
- One point and one question prepared for every seminar.

Exercises

1. Take signpost-based notes in your next lecture; expand them within 24 hours.

2. Prepare and deliver a three-minute summary of a reading to a friend.

3. Write two seminar questions on a current topic — one clarifying, one challenging.

Chapter 6

Study Skills — Planning, Revision and Examinations

The final chapter is the engine room: how to plan a term, revise so knowledge lasts, and perform in examinations — the skills that decide whether the English and knowledge of the earlier chapters ever get their chance to count.

Planning the term

Map the term on one page: deadlines, tests, and the weekly rhythm of classes. Work backwards from each deadline in stages — research, outline, draft, revise — with dates. A plan that exists only as intentions will be replaced, daily, by urgency; a written plan defends the important against the merely loud.

Active revision

Re-reading feels like study and is nearly the weakest form of it. What works: recalling from memory (close the book and write what you know), practising past questions under time, spacing sessions across days, and teaching the topic aloud to an imaginary class. Difficulty during revision is the sensation of learning happening.

Examination technique

Read the whole paper first; allocate minutes by marks; answer the question set, structured as your essays were taught; leave time to review. In the hall, your English serves you exactly as trained: clear claims, evidence, structure. Panic is a planning failure arriving late — the

plan is the cure, applied all term.

Looking after the student

Sleep, food, movement and friendship are study equipment, not rewards after it. The brain consolidates learning in sleep; the student who trades the night before an examination for revision is selling the consolidation that makes revision count. Study like an athlete trains: hard, in sessions, with recovery.

Key points

- Plan backwards from deadlines, in writing.
- Revise actively: recall, practise, space, teach.
- Sleep is study equipment; protect it.

Exercises

1. Build your term plan on one page, working backwards from two deadlines.

2. Revise one topic by closed-book recall, then check and repair.

3. Sit one past question under timed conditions and mark it honestly.

Appendix — Worked Examples and Practice

From Chapter 1 — Reading Academic Texts

Worked example: a heading 'Causes of the 2008 food price crisis' becomes three questions before reading — which causes does the author name, which does he rank first, what evidence supports the ranking? After reading, the notes answer all three in the student's own words, with one doubt marked. The section is now known, not merely seen.

From Chapter 2 — Academic Vocabulary and Grammar

Worked example: 'The data proves that the new variety is better' overclaims twice — data of one trial, and 'better' without a measure. Repaired: 'In this trial, the new variety yielded 18 per cent more than the local variety, which suggests it may perform better on similar soils.' Every word now matches the evidence — that matching is academic style.

From Chapter 3 — Essays — Structure and Argument

Worked example: title — 'Discuss the view that food security depends more on access than on production.' Thesis: 'This essay argues that while production sets the ceiling, access decides who eats, and that policy neglects access at its peril.' Plan: definitions; the production case; the access case with evidence; exceptions (subsistence regions); conclusion. The argument exists before a

paragraph is written.

From Chapter 4 — Reports, Summaries and Referencing

Worked example: an original sentence — 'Mulching raised dry-season yields by conserving soil moisture and suppressing weeds' — paraphrased: 'Yields in the dry season were higher under mulch, because the soil stayed moist longer and fewer weeds competed with the crop (Author, Year).' Same claim, new architecture, debt acknowledged: a clean paraphrase.

From Chapter 5 — Listening to Lectures and Speaking in Seminars

Worked example: a lecturer says, 'There are three explanations. The first is weak… the second, however, has support…' The signpost notes read: '3 explanations: 1) weak. 2) supported — evidence: …' — twelve words capturing the lecture's skeleton, against a classmate's four pages of dictation that contain the same skeleton buried alive. Structure noted is structure remembered.

From Chapter 6 — Study Skills — Planning, Revision and Examinations

Worked example: an examination is six weeks away. The plan: weeks 1–2, notes completed and summarised per topic; weeks 3–4, one past question per topic, marked against the scheme; week 5, the weakest two topics again; week 6, two full papers under time, then rest. Nothing heroic — which is precisely why it works when heroic plans collapse.

Further Practice — Review and Discussion

Work through these prompts in writing; they are the revision spine of this book. Answer in full sentences, with examples from your own place of study wherever the prompt allows.

Chapter 1 — Reading Academic Texts

- Explain in your own words, with one example: Survey the whole text before reading any of it deeply.
- Explain in your own words, with one example: Turn headings into questions to read with purpose.
- Explain in your own words, with one example: Summarise in your own words; mark doubts and questions.

Discussion: where does the subject of this chapter — reading academic texts — touch your own community, farm, school or workplace? Write one page, naming real places and real constraints, and end with one question you would research next.

Chapter 2 — Academic Vocabulary and Grammar

- Explain in your own words, with one example: Learn academic words in families and partnerships.
- Explain in your own words, with one example: Hedge exactly to your evidence — no more, no less.
- Explain in your own words, with one example: One paragraph, one idea, opened by its claim.

Discussion: where does the subject of this chapter — academic vocabulary and grammar — touch your own community, farm, school or workplace? Write one page, naming real places and real constraints, and end with one question you would research next.

Chapter 3 — Essays — Structure and Argument

- Explain in your own words, with one example: Answer the question set, not its neighbour.
- Explain in your own words, with one example: Thesis first, plan second, prose third.
- Explain in your own words, with one example: Every reason needs cited evidence.

Discussion: where does the subject of this chapter — essays — structure and argument — touch your own community, farm, school or workplace? Write one page, naming real places and real constraints, and end with one question you would research next.

Chapter 4 — Reports, Summaries and Referencing

- Explain in your own words, with one example: Reports keep the standard anatomy; readers rely on it.
- Explain in your own words, with one example: A summary adds nothing of the summariser.
- Explain in your own words, with one example: Cite ideas as well as words; quote sparingly and exactly.

Discussion: where does the subject of this chapter — reports, summaries and referencing — touch your own

community, farm, school or workplace? Write one page, naming real places and real constraints, and end with one question you would research next.

Chapter 5 — Listening to Lectures and Speaking in Seminars

- Explain in your own words, with one example: Prepare a frame before the lecture; listen for signposts.
- Explain in your own words, with one example: Expand notes from memory within a day.
- Explain in your own words, with one example: One point and one question prepared for every seminar.

Discussion: where does the subject of this chapter — listening to lectures and speaking in seminars — touch your own community, farm, school or workplace? Write one page, naming real places and real constraints, and end with one question you would research next.

Chapter 6 — Study Skills — Planning, Revision and Examinations

- Explain in your own words, with one example: Plan backwards from deadlines, in writing.
- Explain in your own words, with one example: Revise actively: recall, practise, space, teach.
- Explain in your own words, with one example: Sleep is study equipment; protect it.

Discussion: where does the subject of this chapter — study skills — planning, revision and examinations — touch your own community, farm, school or workplace? Write one page, naming real places and real constraints, and end

with one question you would research next.

Glossary of Key Terms

Hedging — Calibrating a claim's strength to its evidence.

Thesis — An essay's answer to its question, stated in one sentence.

Paraphrase — Restating a source fully in one's own words and structure, with citation.

Topic sentence — The sentence stating a paragraph's claim, usually its first.

Signpost — A phrase announcing a text's or lecture's structure.

Active revision — Study by recall and practice rather than re-reading.

Plagiarism — Presenting borrowed words or ideas as one's own.

Register — The variety of language fitted to a setting — here, academic English.

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