

Introduction to the Skills of Extended Writing and Research

In this unit you will:

- be introduced to extended writing and what it involves;
- find out about writing a paper.

Introduction

Academic disciplines on the typical university campus

There are a number of schools (or colleges) on university campuses, and within these, there are departments. This page from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology's website gives an example of how universities are usually structured.

The screenshot shows the MIT Facts website. The main heading is "SCHOOLS, DEPARTMENTS, DIVISIONS, SECTIONS, AND PROGRAMS". The page is organized into several sections:

- School of Architecture and Planning**
 - Architecture (Course 4)
 - Media Arts and Sciences (MAS)
 - Urban Studies and Planning (Course 11)
- School of Engineering**
 - Aeronautics and Astronautics (Course 16)
 - Biological Engineering (Course 20)
 - Chemical Engineering (Course 10)
 - Civil and Environmental Engineering (Course 1)
 - Electrical Engineering and Computer Science (Course 6)
 - Engineering Systems Division (ESD)
 - Materials Science and Engineering (Course 3)
 - Mechanical Engineering (Course 2)
 - Nuclear Science and Engineering (Course 22)
- School of Humanities, Arts, and Social Sciences**
 - Anthropology (Course 21A)
 - Comparative Media Studies (CMS)
 - Economics (Course 14)
 - Foreign Languages and Literatures (Course 21F)
 - History (Course 21H)
 - Humanities (Course 21)
 - Linguistics and Philosophy (Course 24)
 - Literature (Course 21L)
 - Music and Theater Arts (Course 21M)
 - Political Science (Course 17)
 - Science, Technology, and Society (STS)
 - Writing and Humanistic Studies (Course 21W)
- Sloan School of Management**
 - Management (Course 15)
- School of Science**
 - Biology (Course 7)
 - Brain and Cognitive Sciences (Course 9)
 - Chemistry (Course 5)
 - Earth, Atmospheric, and Planetary Sciences (Course 12)
 - Mathematics (Course 18)
 - Physics (Course 8)
- Whitaker College of Health Sciences and Technology**
 - Harvard-MIT Division of Health Sciences and Technology (HST)
- MIT-WHOI Joint Program in Oceanography and Applied Ocean Science and Engineering**

The left sidebar contains navigation links under "THEMES" (Overview, Education, Research, Community) and "TOPICS" (MIT in Focus, Mission and Origins, Presidents of the Institute, Administrative Organization, Building MIT's Resources, Schools and Departments, Accreditation, Undergraduate Education, Graduate Education, Research at MIT, Lincoln Laboratory, The Campus, Faculty and Staff, Enrollments 2008-2009, International Students & Scholars, Admission to MIT, Tuition and Financial Aid, Housing, MIT Computing, MIT Libraries, MIT Press, The Arts, Athletics and Recreation, MIT and the Community, MIT and Industry, Educational Partnerships, Research Alliances, OpenCourseWare, MIT Students after Graduation, MIT Alumni Association, Geographic Distribution of Alumni, Financial Data, Frequently Asked Questions, MIT Campus Map, Cover Gallery). The MIT logo and name are at the bottom left.

Source: MIT. (2009). Retrieved August 4, 2009, from MIT website: <http://web.mit.edu/facts/academic.html>

Students usually have to produce a specific type of written assignment, which they are assessed on, and this normally differs according to the requirements of their academic department. The type of writing that students have to produce also depends on the level of study: whether *undergraduate*, *graduate*, or *doctoral (PhD)*.

Extended writing at university: why do students write?

Students write for a number of purposes, according to the particular requirements of their major. In many cases, the topic or title will be predetermined by the professor and may require the reading of recommended texts. At other times—for example, when writing a thesis or dissertation—students have to choose their own titles. Students will receive guidelines and support from a faculty member, but on the whole, they are expected to work independently at this level.

The reasons why students carry out extended academic writing activities may include the following:

- to develop and express their ideas;
- to provide evidence to support their ideas;
- to show they can dispute or support existing theories (which involves demonstrating their *critical thinking* ability);
- to display knowledge.

The type of writing required is determined by the *purpose* of the writing.

Key research and writing skills: Critical thinking is an important feature of academic study. Imagine, for example, that you have borrowed a book from the university library that has to be returned the following day, but it contains important information you need for an essay. You will have to think “critically” about which information in the book is going to be useful so you can quickly take appropriate notes or photocopies, i.e., use your critical thinking skills. Understanding what is relevant is one example of the ability to think critically. Another example of critical thinking is recognizing the writer’s *purpose*, or reason for writing a text, e.g., whether it is to inform, to persuade, or to support or refute a viewpoint.

Task 1: Critical thinking

In the box below, make a list of at least three examples of what you might need to think about critically when you are studying. Two examples have already been provided.

- a) Recognizing relevant information
- b) Identifying the writer’s purpose
- c) _____
- d) _____
- e) _____

Task 2: What do students in higher education write?

You are going to brainstorm some ideas about the kind of writing students have to do at university. This involves writing down as many ideas as you can about the topic. You are going to do this very quickly, within a time limit, so don’t be concerned about the accuracy of your grammar or spelling.

2.1 Work with a partner. Brainstorm the kinds of writing students have to do at university.

Note your ideas in the box below, without worrying about how you write, the order of ideas, etc. One idea has been written for you as an example.

WHAT STUDENTS HAVE TO WRITE AT UNIVERSITY

- Reports of experiments
- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____

2.2 Now read the explanation below of the types of writing expected of students in higher education. Compare them with your own ideas.

University students are often asked to write *essays*. These may be as short as 600 words, especially during exams. However, undergraduate students as well as graduate students are also frequently required to write *extended essays*. A typical length for an extended essay is 2,500–3,000 words. We sometimes refer to these extended essays as *papers*.

Towards the end of their period of study, most students will be expected to write either a *thesis* or a *dissertation*. Collins Cobuild Advanced Learner's English Dictionary defines a dissertation as "a long piece of writing based on the writer's own ideas and research as part of a university degree, especially a higher degree such as a PhD."

According to Christopher D. Clack, Director of Financial Computing at UCL, London, UK, a PhD thesis is the:

acquisition and dissemination of new knowledge. In order to demonstrate this the author must demonstrate an understanding of the relevant state of the art and an understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of current methods. For someone's work to be knowledge there must be a demonstration that suitable and systematic methods were used to evaluate the chosen hypothesis.

Not all students are required to write traditional-style essays. For example, in the Engineering Department of a university, students will often be expected to write *reports* on projects they have been working on during their course.

In certain academic disciplines, such as Applied Linguistics, Education or Sociology, students may be required to write a *case study*. A good example of a case study might be the "study of speech, writing, or language use of one person, either at one point in time or over a period of time, e.g., a child over a period of one year" (Richards, Platt & Weber, 1985, p. 36). A student in an Applied Linguistics Department would probably write a case study like this.

Students also have to write *notes*: from written sources, or when attending a lecture, seminar, or tutoring session. Some students *annotate* lecture handouts, either by highlighting key points or by writing notes/comments in the margins of the text, which may be useful later.

- 2.3** Discuss with a partner what types of writing you expect to do in your university classes in the future.

Task 3: Types of writing

Complete the table below to clarify your understanding of the types of writing described on page 11.

Type of writing	Type of student	Explanation
essay for an exam		traditional 600–1,000-word text written during an exam
non-exam essay		written work submitted as part of the course requirement—typically 600–6,000 words
report		
dissertation		
thesis		
case study		
notes		
annotations		

Writing as a common process

Whatever form of extended writing students are expected to do, the process will usually involve the following steps:

- gathering information from various sources;
- organizing this information so that it appropriately answers the needs of the task that the writer has to complete;
- planning the text;
- drafting and redrafting the text until it communicates the information and ideas fully and clearly.

Study tip

When carrying out research, you need to:

- learn to work independently;
- find the information yourself;
- take personal responsibility for your writing;
- make sure you can explain your ideas to others.

Types of assessment

The writing of reports, case studies, dissertations and theses forms part of the assessment process in most academic disciplines in universities. Another means of assessment is *oral presentations*. Presentations are normally given as part of a study project. For example, a student writing a report might give a presentation in order to “present” her/his report in a clear, concise way. Oral presentations can be given by an individual student, or they can be group presentations.

Another form of presentation is the *poster presentation*. In this case, the student prepares a visual display outlining the work or project s/he has been involved in. A poster presentation will normally be given during a student conference. Students display their work, and participants and visitors to the conference are invited to look at the display and ask the author of the poster questions about the process or information they can see. At the same time, other students will be giving oral presentations at the conference. You will do further work on presentations later in this book (see Unit 8).

Apart from the methods of written and oral assessment mentioned above, of course, students will probably have to take exams at the end of semester and/or the end of year.



Writing papers

You will do most of the extended writing for this course independently, outside the classroom. Any writing that goes on in the classroom will normally be for editing purposes, when you will have an opportunity to consult your instructor and redraft your work accordingly. You will be expected to follow a process writing approach (see *English for academic studies: Writing*, Course Book pages 7–8, for a full explanation of this term). This approach includes editing your work, submitting your first draft and redrafting the paper after your instructor has given you feedback.

This Course Book is designed to be used for applying the skills and strategies that you have already studied and developed in more general writing and reading classes, i.e., skills such as skimming and scanning, structuring an essay, and writing a conclusion.

You might also have the opportunity to take part in one-on-one tutoring sessions with your instructor, in order to discuss the first and subsequent drafts of any extended writing that you are working on.

Task 4: Getting help with writing

Write down three aspects of your project that you might expect to discuss with your instructor.

- a) _____
- b) _____
- c) _____

You will be expected to go on redrafting and revising the content of your text in order to improve it, as long as you are able to submit your final draft before any submission deadline. The process you go through while writing the paper is just as important as the final product and the final grade. Writing your paper gives you the opportunity to practice the academic skills and conventions you have been learning and developing on all components of your ESL course.

Guided Projects 1 and 2

This course is based around a guided project on the topic of sustainable development. For this project, you will be given certain “core” texts to consult. However, you will have the opportunity to carry out some independent research, because you can select two extra texts of your own choice from books, journals, or online sources. You will need to provide hard copies of these sources for your instructor, and, of course, they must be sources written in English.

The aim of this guided project is to give you practice in finding appropriate information. Although a range of texts are available, you will need to read *selectively* in order to find information that is relevant to the task title. You will also practice taking notes from these sources, and using them as the basis for summarizing ideas and synthesizing information into your project. In addition, you will be given advice on how to avoid plagiarism and how to acknowledge the origin of your information.

The guided project should be considered as practice for a second project related to your own subject area. For this second project, you should make all the decisions about the subject, topic, and title, and you will carry out the research independently (including the search for appropriate sources).

Note: Your instructor might decide not to do Project 1 and simply make use of the practice activities to develop the necessary skills for completing Project 2, on a topic related to your own field of study.

Study tip

While working on projects, you should make good use of any available office hours.

- Prepare questions before visiting your instructor.
- When working on a project in your subject area, be sure that you have a thorough knowledge of the topic you are writing about.



Task 5: Analyzing the task

Before you begin any task, it is important to analyze carefully what it requires you to do. You will then have a very clear idea of your purpose for writing. Consider the following project title:

To what extent can the problems of urbanization be met by a policy of sustainable development?

Analyze the title and highlight the key words and phrases. Then discuss the following with a partner.

- a) How is the title framed, e.g., statement/question/heading?
- b) What does the title ask you to do?

Task 6: The stages of writing a paper

There are three stages in producing an extended essay or paper: planning, researching, and writing. In each of these stages, there are a number of smaller steps.

6.1 Read steps a–p, below. Then write them under the appropriate stage headings on page 16, *Planning, Researching, or Writing*, in the most appropriate order.

Write the steps in full, not just the letters. Note that one step can be placed in two stages.

- a) Read the first draft.
- b) Edit the draft—decide objectively whether your ideas have been expressed clearly.
- c) Think of a working title for the paper. ✓
- d) Search for relevant journals/books/information in the library and on the Internet.
- e) Write down the details of your sources.
- f) Decide if you need to do more reading.
- g) Write the contents page, bibliography, title page, and abstract. ✓
- h) Arrange to meet with your professor.
- i) Do some reading.
- j) Decide on a topic.
- k) Write the first complete draft.
- l) Highlight/take notes of relevant information. ✓
- m) Plan the contents in detail.
- n) Work on establishing a clear focus.
- o) Make a rough outline plan of your ideas.
- p) Make sure sources are available/accessible.

Planning

- 1 _____
- 2 _____
- 3 *Think of a working title for the paper.*
- 4 _____
- 5 _____
- 6 _____

Researching

- 1 _____
- 2 _____
- 3 *Highlight/take notes of relevant information.*
- 4 _____
- 5 _____

Writing

- 1 _____
- 2 _____
- 3 _____
- 4 _____
- 5 *Write the contents page, bibliography, title page, and abstract.*

6.2 Now discuss your answer with a partner. There is more than one possible order.

Task 7: Starting Project 1

In Task 5, you analyzed the title of the paper *To what extent can the problems of urbanization be met by a policy of sustainable development?* You are now going to work on this project by answering a number of questions, which are grouped under three broad headings: *Introduction*, *Main body*, and *Conclusion*.

Study tip

It is always useful to take time to ask yourself questions about an essay title, as a way of both analyzing it and brainstorming ideas. This also helps you to organize the structure of your writing.

7.1 Read questions a–k, below, carefully and think of any possible answers.

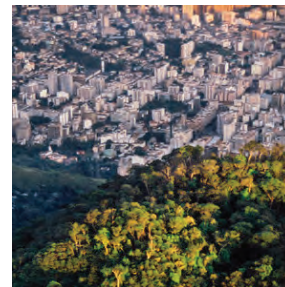
Introduction

- a) What is “sustainable development?” (Definition)
- b) What is “urbanization?” (Definition)
- c) What are the problems of urbanization? (Background information)
- d) What policies of sustainable development exist or could be introduced? (Background information)
- e) To what extent do you *think* sustainable development can solve the problems?

Note: The expression *to what extent* allows you to give your opinion about the likely success of sustainable development policies. Your position (opinion) on this question will help form your *thesis*—that is the main argument you will present in your paper.

Main body

- f) What specific problems are related to a lack of urban space? What evidence can you find for this?
- g) What specific problems are related to urban transport? What evidence can you find for this?
- h) What are the possible solutions to the problems outlined above?
- i) What evidence can you find to suggest that a policy of sustainable development can be successful?



Conclusion

- j) Based on the evidence you have presented above, to what extent can a policy of sustainable development meet the current urban problems related to a lack of space and transport?
- k) Does the evidence you put together in the “main body” support the thesis you introduced in your introduction?



7.2 Brainstorm some ideas on the above questions in groups.

Write your ideas in the appropriate boxes on page 18. You need only to write in note form.

At the moment, you are only being asked to guess what the answers might be. After this, you will do some reading to find out whether your guesses were appropriate. You will also be reading to find other ideas about the topic. This reading stage is one of the most important parts of your work, because you will be looking for evidence to support your ideas.

Introduction

- 1 _____
- 2 _____
- 3 _____
- 4 _____
- 5 _____
- 6 _____

Main body

- 1 *Lack of playground facilities for children.* _____
- 2 _____
- 3 _____
- 4 _____
- 5 _____
- 6 _____

Conclusion

- 1 _____
- 2 _____
- 3 _____
- 4 _____
- 5 _____
- 6 _____

Unit Summary

In this unit, you have been introduced to the basic concept of extended writing and the types of extended writing that you may be required to produce. You have discovered what a project involves and looked at the various stages of good paper writing.

1 Using the verbs in the box below, complete these possible reasons for writing an extended paper.

dispute develop display provide

- a) to show that you can express and _____ ideas
- b) to show that you can _____ evidence to support ideas
- c) to show that you can _____ or support existing theories (which demonstrates critical thinking ability)
- d) to _____ knowledge

2 Look at the following examples of critical thinking. Mark each with either G, for *this is something I am good at*, or NG, for *this is something I am not so good at and I need to practice*.

- a) recognizing what is relevant and what is not relevant ___
- b) identifying the writer's purpose ___
- c) assessing the writer's argument ___
- d) comparing and evaluating issues ___
- e) evaluating the credibility of the writer's sources ___

3 Check (✓) the types of extended writing that you need to practice and improve on to be successful on your course.

- | | | | |
|----------------------|--------------------------|---------------|--------------------------|
| a) essay for an exam | <input type="checkbox"/> | d) thesis | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| b) non-exam essay | <input type="checkbox"/> | e) report | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| c) dissertation | <input type="checkbox"/> | f) case study | <input type="checkbox"/> |

4

Look at the three stages involved in producing an extended written text, below. For each stage, write two of the steps you would need to carry out.

The first one has been done for you as an example.

- a) planning make a rough outline plan of your ideas

- b) researching _____

- c) writing _____

5

Think about the project you started in Unit 1 and answer the questions below.

- a) What did you enjoy?
- b) What did you find easy?
- c) What did you find difficult?

For web resources relevant to this unit, see:

www.englishforacademicstudy.com/us/student/ewrs/links