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Preface

University or college graduates regularly have to write a text as part of their job requirements. Whether these texts are policy documents, scientific articles, or reports about a client, in all these cases a structured and clear writing style is of great importance. Professional writing means verbalising your ideas in such a way that their meaning and intent becomes clear to the reader. A person who is not able to write clearly is often not taken seriously. A policy document that cannot be understood ends up in the bottom of a drawer. An innovative scientific article will be refused if it's full of grammatical errors. The consequence of an unclear report about a client could be that this client does not receive the help he or she needs.

Although university or college graduates have completed a higher education program, they are often still lacking adequate writing skills. Newly graduated students frequently find themselves struggling when they have to write a text. However, through extensive exercise they can learn how to write properly. Different writing skills need to be distinguished in these exercises, such as structuring a text, spelling correctly, and summarising.

Students should already have received intensive training in these skills during their education. For example, by writing different reports that their teachers read and comment on. However, in practice, the training of writing skills often receives quite little attention in higher education programs. One of the reasons is that providing written reports with good comments takes a lot of time and is therefore expensive. Furthermore, having to review these reports is often frustrating for teachers. Most students make the same type of mistake, which forces teachers to give the same comments over and over again. This often leads teachers to

form the opinion that providing these comments is ‘a waste of time’. In many educational institutions, training in writing skills therefore remains limited to writing a few reports, with minimal instruction and limited specific comments by the teacher. It is expected that students master the writing skills more or less on their own, by writing these reports for different courses. However, in these reports, the main focus of the feedback is on the content, and much less on how the report is written. As a consequence, many students in higher education do not really learn how to write well.

In order to tackle this problem, the authors of this book, all connected to the Institute for Psychology at the Erasmus University Rotterdam in the Netherlands, have developed a digital course in *Academic Writing Skills*. The aim of this course is to provide students with more targeted exercises in ‘micro’ writing skills, without the need for teachers to invest much time providing instructions and comments. The name of the course indicates that the focus is on exercises that students can do by themselves in order to practice their writing skills. The course consists of seven digital programs that have been given the title *Diskits* (*abbreviation of Digital Skill Training*). Through these digital programs, students can practice different micro writing skills. Examples of these micro-skills are: structuring paragraphs, creating cohesion within sentences and (sub)paragraphs, and formulating a specific central question.

Each Diskit starts with an *explanation* of a certain aspect of writing. This explanation leads to a *rule of thumb*, a guideline which students can use for writing a report. Examples of rules of thumb are: ‘Only discuss one topic per paragraph’, or ‘Avoid complex phrasing’. After this, a number of *short exercises* are presented which require students to use the rule of thumb. So, the program does not only provide information about the different micro-skills, but also allows the student to practice these skills. Because there are no strict rules as to what constitutes a good text, the

feedback on the completed exercises often consists of a good example, the so called *expert version*. This good example is written by someone who has extensive experience with writing. Students can compare their own answer to the expert version. Eventually, they can use the rule of thumb for writing and revising writing assignments of their own. By taking a writing skills training course in this structured manner, students gain knowledge of a large number of rules that are of importance when they have to write a text. The exercises in the Diskits offer a way to become more skilled in writing, without the need for a teacher to regularly review and provide comments on these texts. The general explanations in each Diskit help to solve the problem of teachers frequently having to provide the same feedback to different students.

As mentioned above, the training *Academic Writing Skills* has been developed at the Institute for Psychology at the Erasmus University Rotterdam (EUR). Since the academic year 2003-2004, we have experimented with the digital programs in the first and second year of the Bachelor program psychology. The outcomes of the evaluations of this training by means of questionnaires show that students consider the training very useful. The rules of thumb are found to be clear and applicable. Most students (76%) prefer working with the digital programs over only using the book, because it allows them to immediately apply the lessons from the program. Although writing skills are not mastered easily, overall the students rate the program as 'good'.

This book can be used as a handbook. It contains all the information that is also provided in the Diskits, making it easy to go over the information again after completing them. Furthermore, this book contains a short instruction for teachers and for students regarding the use of the Diskits. These Diskits are available on www.academicwritingskillscourse.com. The reader will find an access code in the book with which he or she can enter the website. Teachers can request an access code by contacting the

publisher in order to gain access to the website as well. On the website, they can keep track of their students and the results of the training.

The authors welcome any comments. These can be sent to us via the website.

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Use of the Diskits by teachers

The Diskits can be used in different ways for writing skills training. As a teacher you are of course free to choose how to use them. As an example, we will provide a description of the way the Diskits have been used in the writing skills training of the Bachelor program Psychology at the Erasmus University Rotterdam.

An example: the writing skills training for Bachelor students of Psychology at the Erasmus University Rotterdam.

The writing skills training within the Bachelor program Psychology at the Erasmus University Rotterdam consists of two courses, taught successively in the first and second year of the Bachelor program. The core of each course is a *writing assignment* that is supported by the Diskits. In both years, the assignment is to write a short report, in which a question has to be answered based on the review of literature. Additionally, a more critical use and processing of the literature is required in the second year. All Diskits have to be completed by the students in the first year. In the second year, students can consult the Diskits again in order to refresh their memory of the guidelines for the different aspects of writing.

In our institute, a period of ten weeks is designated each year for the writing skills training. However, during this time students are not only training their writing skills, they take other psychology courses as well. The structure of the writing skills training follows three phases than can be distinguished within the writing process: preparation, writing, and revising.

In the first three weeks, the students have the opportunity to prepare for their writing assignment. This involves preparing a

topic, searching for literature, reading literature, thinking of a question and possibly, based on the formulation of this question, searching for more literature. In these first three weeks, students work on an action plan; this is more or less a basic structure for the report. For this, they have to write down the order of the headings and describe for each heading, in short, what will be discussed and which source will be used for the information that will be presented. During this period, students also have to complete the first four Diskits. The rules of thumb that they learn have to be applied in writing the action plan. The action plan has to be completed and submitted to the teacher at the end of the third week. The plan is not graded but is reviewed by the teacher and students receive feedback on the structure and basic content of their writing assignment. This is important because many students have difficulty creating a good structure in their text.

In the next three weeks, students start writing a rough draft. In this period, they have to complete Diskits 5 and 6. The rules of thumb in these Diskits should then be applied in writing the draft version of their assignment. At the end of the sixth week, this first version of the report has to be completed and submitted to the teacher. Again, feedback is provided and the draft serves as a requirement for continuing the writing skills training. Because many students will only complete their assignment at the time it has to be submitted, they often skip the revision phase. However, since we consider it really important that students learn to critically review and improve their own writing, the decision was made to include this interim deadline for the first draft of the assignment in the design of our writing skills training program.

After the first version has been completed and after having received feedback, the students start to rewrite it. They should do this during the last four weeks of the training. In this period the students also have to complete the last digital training in Diskit 7. Using the rules of thumb they have learnt, students have to go through their report, sentence by sentence, and revise the pas-

sages or sentences that could be improved. Finally, at the end of the ten weeks, the writing assignment has to be completed and submitted to the teacher. The criteria for grading the reports are based on the content of the Diskits. The grading in the second year contains the same points that were used in the first year. For these criteria we refer to the Appendix: *Writing skills review form*.

Use of the Diskits by students

Your teacher will likely have provided you with guidelines on how to use the Diskits when you had to acquire this book for your studies. You may also have acquired this book out of your own interest in improving your writing skills. In that case, you can complete the Diskits in the order you find most suitable. The different Diskits can be used independently. As a helpful tip, we suggest to take plenty of time revising your writing assignment. When you think your assignment is finished, put it aside for a few days and review it thoroughly later. You will also find it useful to have somebody else read it and to ask for feedback on certain points that you may be less sure about. You can use the rules of thumb that you learn from working on the Diskits as guidelines when writing and revising your text. This book can be used as a handbook, in order to go over the rules of thumb and their explanations again after completing the Diskits.

Short overview of the Diskit content

Diskit-1: General structure covers the general structure of a text. How can students make sure that the common theme of their report is clear to the reader? In the first place, structure relates to the different sections in the report. Each section is then further structured into different paragraphs.

Diskit-2: Structure of a scientific review article considers the structure of a scientific review article (review, here, means overview of the literature). This Diskit covers which information should be given in the introduction, in the middle part, in the discussion and conclusion, and in the abstract of this type of article or report.

Diskit-3: Citing, paraphrasing, and quoting looks at the way in which students can use literature from other authors in their own report, without committing plagiarism. For this, the rules and guidelines from the internationally leading citing system of the American Psychological Association (APA) are used. These rules can also be used for other social sciences. Students learn how to cite the work of other authors in the text and how to write a reference list. Subsequently, students learn how to refer to texts of others using their own words (paraphrasing) and what the rules are for quoting others.

Diskit-4: Argumentation deals with different types of arguments and the structure of arguments. This Diskit covers how students can support a statement in their report. Flaws in reasoning, such as informal fallacies, are also a subject of discussion.

Diskit-5: Cohesion and sentence structure deals with the cohesion within a text and between the separate sentences of a text. Students are explained how to make sure that the text forms a whole and doesn't wander in different directions. Different sentence structures are also discussed. Moreover, attention is given to sentences that are easier or more difficult to read.

Diskit-6: Scientific writing deals with the style of writing that is appropriate within a scientific context. The writing style should match the goal of the text and what it intends to communicate. A journalist, for instance, can use an ironic style for a column in a newspaper; however, this is not suitable for a scientific article. In science, it is common to write in an objective, formal, and clear manner. In this Diskit, it is explained how students can achieve this style of writing.

Diskit-7: Revision and completion deals with several grammatical topics that cause problems for many students. The use of punctuation marks is also covered briefly. Furthermore, attention is given to the final revisions on content. Is all the necessary information provided clearly in the text? Finally, the general appearance of the text is discussed. For this, the guidelines of the American Psychological Association are mentioned, for example regarding lay-out and the use of tables.

Diskit-1: General structure

Introduction

Any well written piece, whether it is a practical report, a literature review, or an essay, can be recognised by a good structure. Different aspects of the text determine its structure. We will discuss them briefly below.

The most obvious of these aspects is the *general structure* of a report. By looking at the index or the different headings, we get a rather good first impression of the structure. Furthermore, it is important that the structure of a report is *logical*. Readers often have expectations about how the text will be organised. For instance, while reading the introduction it must become clear to your reader, right away, what the topic of your text is, otherwise he or she may lose interest. As an author, you should also make clear what it is you want to say about this topic: what is your *main aim*? In a literature review you often achieve this by writing towards a *central question*. The reader will then expect to get information that is helpful for *answering* this question. Assume you have the following central question: ‘What is the effect of an increased workload on the efficiency of nurses?’ You could then write about workload in a hospital, about how to measure workload and efficiency, and about research on these topics. Information that does not fit within this description concerns, for instance, explanations about other factors that influence efficiency, like motivation and work climate. You will learn that you only should provide information that is directly relevant to your central question.

A good structure is important on lower levels in the text as well, for instance in the *order of paragraphs* and in the *transition between paragraphs*. Constructing paragraphs is one of the most important skills when writing a text. Paragraphs with a good structure show that the author has put much thought into writing the text. A text is not simply a collection of sentences, rather it is wickerwork of interrelated thoughts.

The central theme of this Diskit is the structure of a text. You will receive explanations about how to make sure that your text has good structure. You will also need to practice adding structure to texts of others and texts of your own.

Part 1: Title and headings

The structure of a report becomes clear at first by the structure of the text. The title of your report and the headings of the different parts indicate the global structure. The reader will base his or her expectations about the content of the text by this structure. If you want to have a good structure in your text, then you need to provide a good title and fitting headings.

The title of your report

Often, the title of your report is the first aspect that may attract the attention of the reader. A good title includes the different core elements that make up the text, like in title 1:

1. ‘The effect of conformity and group-oriented motivation on the acquirement of status in a small group’

Here, it is clearly reported which elements are dealt with in the text. The title is therefore the first aspect through which the structure of your text can be expressed. Make sure that your title is not too general, like title 2:

2. 'Schizophrenia'

The reader will now know that the report is about schizophrenia, but it remains unclear what exactly will be discussed. Therefore, the reader cannot develop any expectations about the content and, for instance, decide whether to read the report or not. Title 3 is an example of a better title:

3. 'Different treatment methods for schizophrenia'

The reader now knows that it will be about the treatment of schizophrenia. Therefore, if he or she is interested in, for example, the origin of this illness, they will have to find another text.

There are also exciting or playful titles, meant to catch the attention of the reader, but that don't indicate at all what the text will be about. Take for instance title 4:

4. 'Mirror, mirror, on the wall, who is the prettiest of us all?'

This title does not reveal much about the content of the text. This problem can be solved by providing a subtitle that does indicate exactly what the reader can expect from the content, as is done in title 5:

5. 'Mirror, mirror, on the wall, who is the prettiest of us all? Explanations for cultural differences in the ideal of beauty'



Rule of thumb 1

Make sure the title of your report indicates clearly what your text is about.