

How can you improve your written English for writing a thesis?

Write in English, start early and write regularly and frequently

- Start writing in English now. Get in the habit of writing short amounts in English every work day. You need regular practice to improve your written English.
- When you are not sure what to write, start writing, but write for yourself alone. At this stage you are writing only to figure out what you want to say, so don't worry about spelling or grammar, punctuation or paragraphs. Write in English, but if you can't think of the right word, put it in your own language and translate it later.
- Once you are clear about what you want to say, then re-write it in English paragraphs so it will be clear for an academic audience.
- Focus on making one clear, main point for every paragraph. Even if your English is not perfect, you will do fine if the reader can understand the main point you are making.

Get feedback about your writing, and give feedback to others

- Get feedback about your written English, and use this feedback to improve your writing. Share your writing with others and ask them whether they can understand what you write.
- Get regular feedback about small amounts of writing. For example every week get feedback about one paragraph, and then use that feedback to improve the rest of your writing.
- Your supervisor will not have enough time to give you all the feedback you need. Find a peer who can give you feedback, such as another Masters or PhD student.
- Give feedback on someone else's writing. You will learn to notice unclear writing, and this will help you improve your own writing. Offer to give feedback to anyone who will give you feedback on your own writing.

Get support for your English and for your writing

- Read guidebooks about writing in general and about writing in English, and practice some of the exercises. Pick one short lesson and practice this rather than trying to practice everything about English grammar. The Student Learning Development website has a number of downloadable resources, for example 'Guidelines for writing and editing' and 'How can I improve my use of the English Language?' (<http://www.otago.ac.nz/hedc/students/digital/index.html#writinglanguageresources>).
- Become familiar with language conventions for thesis writing. Read theses and journal articles in your field, and study how they are written. Look at the sentence structure, organisation of paragraphs, and the words they use. How did they introduce the topic, write the methods, introduce complex definitions, indicate gaps in the literature, connect ideas or make claims about the new knowledge? Your supervisor may be able to suggest good theses that you can read. Academic Phrasebank also has a guide to common academic phrases that you can use in your thesis (<http://www.phrasebank.manchester.ac.uk/>).

Practice speaking and reading English

- Practice speaking and reading academic English in your field. Each field has its own particular version of English that you need to master.
- Speak English regularly and frequently. The more you practice thinking and speaking in English, the better your written English. To practice your English you might get a Language Mentor or join a Conversational English group (<http://www.otago.ac.nz/hedc/students/peer/index.html>).

[Type here]

- Listen to and read English, for example English-language movies, news reports and books. The more you practice listening to and reading English, the better your written English.
- Working in a second language is tiring, so set yourself writing goals and work towards them, but build breaks into your schedule. Writing a thesis is like running a marathon, especially for students whose first language is not English. You need to look after yourself, so you can reach the finish line.

Take some time for editing and proofreading

- Before submitting your writing, proofread your writing several times to spot mistakes or unclear language. Read what you have actually written, not what you intended, or what you mean. Read your work several times focussing on one thing per read, such as clear sentences in the first read, then consistent tenses in the second read, then accurate references in the third read, etc.
- To make proof-reading easier you might:
 - a. Read from a printed copy (or blow up the text size to 200% on the screen).
 - b. Read your work aloud.
 - c. Leave your work for a few hours, or even days, before proofreading it again. This time lapse means you sometimes detect points that need improving or correcting that you didn't see during the first proofreading.
- You are free to ask anyone you choose to proof-read your thesis, paid or unpaid. "Proof-reading is defined as the correction of errors in spelling, punctuation, grammar and sentence construction, referencing, and idiomatic usage. Proof-reading may include identifying and alerting the candidate to passages that lack clarity of exposition or are poorly written or constructed." A proof-reader cannot do any substantial editing of your writing. See the University policy about proof-reading a thesis for more details: (<http://www.otago.ac.nz/administration/policies/otago011276.html>)

From Viv, Emma, Naoko, Pauline and Clinton

How I learnt to write English for my thesis

Naoko Inoue

I am a Japanese student, and English is not my first language. I have been writing in English for academic purposes for about seven years. Although I have encountered lots of challenges and struggled particularly for the first few years, I believe my writing skills improved significantly over the past seven years.

In order to improve my academic writing, I read academic papers, books and theses in my research field. While reading I pay attention not only to content, but also to language related elements, such as the use of vocabulary and organisation of sentences and paragraphs. I then try to apply these elements to my own writing.

In writing, I start with very rough drafts, which I do not show to others and my focus is not so much on the language but mainly on the content. I would not even hesitate to use my first language (i.e. Japanese) when working on these rough drafts, particularly when I jot down ideas and try to put my ideas together. I can always go back to points written in Japanese later and change them to English.

After writing several drafts and when I come to the point to write my final draft, I pay attention to my English as well as the flow of the arguments very carefully, and reread my final draft several times. It is a very slow process to improve academic writing skills in English, and I used to get very frustrated that I could not see my improvement. However, as I kept challenging myself, my writing skills slowly but steadily improved without noticing. It is like building bricks one by one. I had to be very patient, but when I look back at my journey, surely I can see an improvement in my writing skills.