**HOW TO SAVE TIME BY IMPROVING THE WRITING ABILITY OF CANDIDATES**

**by Simon Moss**

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| **Introduction** |

One task that supervisors complain about frequently—the task that perhaps demands the most time—is reading drafts. If research candidates do not write proficiently, this task is especially demanding. Charles Darwin University have developed a range of resources and initiatives to improve the writing skills of research candidates. This document is designed to help supervisors contribute to this endeavor, primarily by encouraging candidates to utilize these provisions.

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| **Resources to improve grammar** |

This document is primarily designed to assist research candidates who tend to write grammatically but not always precisely, concisely, engagingly, or professionally. However, if your candidates do not write grammatically—perhaps because English is not their first language—you could encourage these individuals to consider the following activities.

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| Resources to assist candidates with grammar |
| For about 30 to 60 minutes a day, read alone and aloud rather than silently. When people read aloud, many grammatical rules are naturally internalized |
| Dedicate about 30 to 60 minutes a day to websites that are designed to improve grammar in English. Examples include www.5minuteenglish.com/grammar.htm or [www.ego4u.com/en/cram-up/grammar |
| To arrange an appointment with a specialist, encourage candidates to access www.cdu.edu.au/academic-language-learning/allsp/make-an-appointment. Click the button “Book for English language support”, create a new user account, and then follow the instructions to book an appointment |

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| **Writing effective paragraphs** |

Most candidates know that every paragraph they write should revolve around only one argument—such as one theory, one explanation, one finding, and so forth. They know that one sentence, often the first, will tend to summarize this argument, sometimes called the topic sentence. And they know that paragraphs should usually comprise between 3 and 8 sentences.

But, despite this knowledge, many candidates do not write suitable paragraphs. Their paragraphs do not evolve logically and cohesively, for example. They need more guidance on how to write paragraphs more effectively. To achieve this goal, candidates can now access a document on how to construct paragraphs—in the Learnline section called “How to write more effectively”. This document demonstrates, in detail, how to write seven types of paragraphs.

Nevertheless, if candidates merely read this document alone, their writing is unlikely to improve miraculously. Instead, supervisors could offer the following support to facilitate this endeavor.

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| Support that supervisors could offer |
| Skim this document to assess whether the seven types of paragraphs are relevant to the candidate. That is, in some disciplines, one or more of these types might not be applicable. If so, instruct candidates to disregard these types of paragraphs |
| Invite the candidates to write several examples of the first type of paragraph: summaries of past research. You could even suggest which research the candidate could summarize and discuss a deadline, such as the next meeting |
| Evaluate these attempts. In particular, assess the degree to which the paragraph evolves logically and cohesively. |
| Each time you meet, apply the same procedure to the next type of paragraph and so forth. |

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| **Writing precisely** |

Many candidates can organize their arguments cohesively but nevertheless write imprecisely. For example, they include many words or phrases that are hazy or ambiguous, such as “a number of” rather than “several”, “many”, or “ten”. In most disciplines, writing that is imprecise tends to be perceived as uncompelling.

Therefore, once candidates have mastered the construction of paragraphs, they should learn how to write more precisely and unambiguously. In particular, encourage candidates to read the document on how to write precisely, available in the Learnline section called “How to write more effectively”. Then, to encourage candidates to practice these principles, consider these activities:

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| Support that supervisors could offer |
| Before the next meeting, invite candidates to write a few paragraphs in which they avoid or clarify ambiguous pronouns, such *as it, they, this*, or *these*. Then, evaluate their attempts during the next meeting. |
| During a subsequent meeting, encourage candidates to write paragraphs in which they utilize more precise alternatives than ambiguous verbs such as *get, give, have, make, take, hold,* and *done*. As always, evaluate their attempts during the next meeting. |
| During the next meeting, instruct candidates to write paragraphs in which they clarify imprecise quantities, such as *a number of* and *lack*. |

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| **Writing concisely** |

In many disciplines, because publishers need to conserve space, publications need to be as concise as possible. To help candidates write more succinctly, encourage these individuals to read the document on how to write concisely, also available in the Learnline section called “How to write more effectively”. To inspire candidates to practice these principles, consider these activities:

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| Support that supervisors could offer |
| This document presents a series of redundant phrases, such as “it is noteworthy that” and tautologies, such as “to summarize briefly”. Invite candidates to use the *find* function in Microsoft Word to uncover and correct instances in which they used these phrases in their past work. |
| During the next meeting, encourage these candidates to apply the same procedure to uncover and correct verbose phrases, such as *at the present time*. This document presents a catalogue of these verbose phrases |
| In addition, the document also presents words that indicate the sentence could be condensed. For example, the sentence “There are cars that are lighter than bikes” could be reduced to “Some cars are lighter than bikes”. Encourage candidates to identify these words—and thus uncover phrases that could be abbreviated—in their past work. |
| Finally, during another meeting, encourage candidates to delete as many sentences as possible from an excerpt they have written without compromising the meaning of their material. |

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| **Writing professionally and correctly** |

Even trivial errors—such as confusing *which, that*, and *who*, *include* and *comprise*, as well as *affect* and *effect*—can exasperate pedantic examiners and reviewers. During one meeting, invite candidates to read the document on how to write professionally and correctly. In a subsequent meeting, encourage candidates to indicate which of these principles they perceived as the most challenging—and perhaps discuss these principles.

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| **Writing formally and objectively** |

In some disciplines, especially in quantitative sciences, reports that are not written formally and objectively are perceived as hazy and dubious. Encourage candidates to read the document on how to write formally. This document, for example, teaches candidates to avoid unnecessary qualifiers, such as *very*, avoid references to personal intuitions, avoid contractions, and generally avoid slashes. Furthermore, perhaps debate with candidates whether these principles are essential or not.

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| **Improving punctuation** |

If candidates do not use punctuation effectively and correctly, their work is likely to seem hazy and imprecise, even if they use the right words. Therefore, encourage candidates to read the document on punctuation, accessible towards the bottom of the Learnline section called “How to write more effectively”. During several meetings, together with the candidate, scan the work they have written earlier to identify and correct errors in their punctuation.

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| **Writing sentences properly** |

Finally, one of the documents in this Learnline section helps candidates write sentences correctly. For example, when they read this document, candidates learn how to

* Write in active voice
* Present the conditional clause first.
* Write shorter sentences until their writing skills are advanced
* Avoid incomplete sentences

To encourage candidates to practice these principles, consider these activities:

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| Support that supervisors could offer |
| During one week, encourage individuals to uncover and change passive sentences, especially sentences in which the subject is ambiguous |
| During the next week, ask candidates to write sentences in which the conditional clause precedes the other clauses. |
| Finally, invite candidates to vary their length of their sentences. In particular, they should first attempt to write many shorter sentences. Next, they could attempt to lengthen some of these shorter sentences. |

Finally, to entrench these principles candidates need to practice this gamut of skills regularly. Therefore, encourage candidates to practice one set of principles—such as how to write more precisely or write sentences correctly—each week.