Writing in English

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Advanced English Writing Skills for Higher Education

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Dedicated to the memory of
Paul Robberecht

Hij zwijgt, omdat hij weet.

Introduction

Have you ever sat in front of a computer screen, for what seems an age, trying to formulate that first sentence of an essay? Have you had doubts about the tone of your email to a teacher, or had difficulty using your notes because key information is missing? These frustrating situations underline the fact that writing, in its many forms, is challenging. Moreover, the size of the challenge only seems to increase when faced with writing in a language that is not our mother-tongue. There might be uncertainties about spelling and punctuation, worries over the accuracy of grammar, and frustration at not achieving the kind of 'flow' we see in native-speaker texts.

These difficulties, and many others besides, are obstacles to achieving the prime objective of writing, *effective communication*. Ideally, we want to produce texts that will convey ideas and information to our intended readers in a clear, efficient and appropriate manner; but it often requires strenuous effort to progress along the path towards that ideal.

The good news is that the difficulties outlined above are by no means insurmountable. Yes, writing is a challenge, but it is also a skill that with guidance and practice can be acquired, developed and refined. *Writing in English* (or Wren for short) has been written with that process in mind. Guidance comes in the form of detailed instruction on a range of techniques that are central to developing sound writing skills, and on specific genres with their attendant conventions. Practice is provided via exercises designed to support your growth as a writer of English-language texts. In addition, this fourth edition of Wren introduces useful materials on artificial intelligence (AI) and writing, providing helpful suggestions in each chapter on how to use AI to help develop specific writing skills.

Artificial intelligence can help the novice writer address a wide range of writing challenges, not least because it can be used to tailor instruction to the individual's writing needs. However, while we believe that AI can be a positive in terms of acquiring and finessing one's writing skills, a note of caution should be sounded. If we fall into the habit of using AI uncritically we deny ourselves

perhaps the most valuable part of learning how to write: the development of the individual voice. This idea of voice in writing is not limited to literary authors, it is relevant to all those who write, whether a student, a journalist, an academic, and so on. The voice behind the text tells the reader that what they are reading is authentically human; and ultimately language is fundamentally a human-to-human medium of communication. If we use AI critically, selectively and as a source of instruction, it can be an invaluable aid to developing one's writing voice. But if we simply use AI as an instant solution to our writing needs, then instead of developing our authentic voice, we become reliant on AI's synthetic alternative.

Wren is divided into three main sections: Core skills, Genres and Accuracy. Core skills focuses on activities and competences that are essential to a wide range of text types. We begin with Notetaking, a primary skill that aids understanding and forms the basis for 'finished' written texts, but a skill that is all-too-often overlooked in writing courses and guides. The Core skills section goes on to cover a range of skills, including, expressing an idea in different ways (paraphrasing), linking information or phases of an argument in a clear and logical manner (cohesion) and using vocabulary and functional phrases appropriate to the context (register).

The Genres section covers a range of text types that are common within an academic environment (e.g. expository essay, peer review, abstract and research paper) but also includes genres that have a broader application (letters and emails, reviews, argumentative essay). As such, Wren is designed to provide relevant materials for the kinds of writing that students often need to produce as part of their studies, and also text types that they may need to use in other contexts (e.g. a film review, a formal email, or a letter of complaint). For each of the genres, attention is paid to the conventional aspects of the text type, ranging from structure and lay-out through to register and functional phrases. The purpose of Wren is to help you acquire the necessary knowledge of each genre, alongside the skills common across genres, so that you will be able to produce effective, persuasive, well-structured examples of your own. The final section, Accuracy, provides instruction and exercises related to grammar and punctuation issues that often arise when writing in English.

Each chapter of Wren is supported by a series of exercises to facilitate practice. On purchasing Wren you will be given online access via a unique code to the answer key for the exercises at ecampuslearn.com. You can find the code on the back of your book's title page. The same code will also give you access to the audio materials used in several of the chapters.

Finally, Wren is intended for students in higher education (university-college or university) who wish to develop their English writing skills across a range of genres at an advanced level. Occasionally, some materials are aimed at Dutch L1 speakers, notably in Chapter 9, but the book as a whole is suitable for speakers of other languages. Moreover, final-year secondary-school pupils for whom English will be an important part of their further studies, might also find much that is of interest in Wren.

Acknowledgements

As Wren progresses (this is now the fourth edition) we warmly remember our colleague Paul Robberecht who was a fellow author on the project at the outset. This book is dedicated to him. We would also like to thank Lynn Van Overtvelt at Academia Press for her support during work on the fourth edition. Thanks are also due to Sam Delmotte who provided the technical know-how for producing the audio material, and to our colleagues in the English section at the department of Translation, Interpreting and Communication (Ghent University) whose valuable feedback on Wren has helped inform the present edition. Finally, a big thank you to our students. Wren has been written for them, but in terms of their questions, comments and work during classes, it has very much been shaped by them.

PART 1

Core Skills

CHAPTER 1
Note-taking

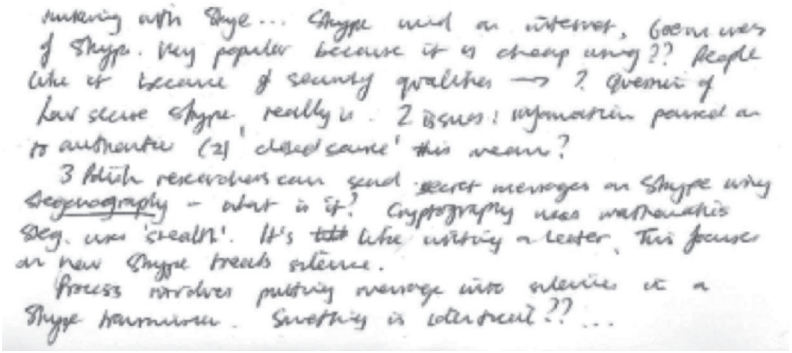
He listens well who takes notes. – Dante Alighieri

INTRODUCTION

Note-taking is a skill that is seldom taught formally in schools or colleges, yet it is a key writing skill. In higher education notes taken during lectures often form an important part of the materials to be studied for examinations. Similarly, notes taken from written sources can be of vital importance when preparing to write an essay, report or dissertation. Moreover, note-taking is an important skill in the workplace where the accurate transfer of information from, say a meeting, presentation or report, makes an important contribution to effective communication.

At a basic level note-taking might be seen as simply a means to record relevant information from a spoken or written text in a condensed form, and it is often regarded as simply a preparatory stage on the road to producing a finished text such as an article, report or essay. The activity is often conducted in an ad-hoc fashion in which the notes are written rapidly in a linear structure as the student struggles to record as much information as possible. Text (a) below shows an excerpt from notes taken on a talk about Skype technology. The writer has attempted to write in full sentences, there is little in the way of abbreviation and the question marks indicate missing content that the writer did not pick up. In addition it is not clear how the different pieces of information relate to each other, for example which points are the main points?

(a)


working with Skype ... Skype used on internet, 600m users of Skype. Very popular because it is cheap using?? People like it because of security qualities → ? Question of how secure Skype really is. 2 issues: information passed on to authorities (2) doesn't sound this means?
3 British researchers can send secret messages on Skype using steganography – what is it? Cryptography uses mathematics eg. uses 'stealth'. It's not like writing a letter. This focuses on how Skype treats silence.
Process involves putting message into silence of a Skype transmission. Security is controversial?? ...

The notes shown in (a) indicate a notion of note-taking as a form of 'normal' writing, only speeded up. However, note-taking is not simply recording information at speed, it is a complex process that involves the simultaneous execution of a number of skills:

- listening/reading in a suitably focused manner, grasping main points
- comprehension of the materials in terms of content, structure
- deciding which information to prioritise
- writing in structured abbreviated forms.

Appreciating this complexity is an important step towards developing sound note-taking skills. Moreover, efficient note-taking is not only an aid to memory, a way of recording information, it is also an aid to understanding.

In example (b) below a student has taken notes on a talk about computer generated imagery. The text is less linear than (a) in its structure, and it is clear that the writer has attempted to situate the information within a clear visual structure that includes thematic blocks and enumerations. Also, the circled labels clarify the linking argument or narrative behind the main points. This then is a more successful example of note-taking than (a) but we can note that while some symbols are used, such as arrows and dashes, there is little in terms of abbreviation.

(b)

In this first chapter the aim is to provide a range of sensible approaches and ideas on selecting relevant information (*What to note down*) and recording that information efficiently (*How to note it down*).

It is important to point out here that the various approaches and techniques shown are suggestions rather than 'rules'. Your notes will usually be for your own use and so how you carry out the task is a matter of your own preferences, as long as you achieve a set of notes that represents the material in a way that is clear to you. Take the elements below that work for your particular style of note-taking and seek to develop a simple and reliable method of structuring and condensing information. And it is worth remembering that the skills you develop in this respect will be valuable during your academic studies and beyond in professional workplace settings.

1.1 WHAT SHOULD I NOTE DOWN?

Do not try to get everything down. You should aim to record the information that is **relevant to your purpose**, which means that you have to be clear about why you are reading/listening to a particular text. If for example your task is to write a summary or to note down the contents of a lecture, you should listen for the main points and try to understand how those points relate to each other. Also, specific information such as definitions, statistics and examples may also be necessary information. In contrast to these purposes you may need to focus on specific kinds of information rather than the main points, for example examining several articles on climate change looking for specific mentions of deforestation. Being clear about the purpose of reading / listening to a given text is, then, the first filter you should apply.

When reading

When taking notes from a written text it is useful to **skim** and **scan** the text. You skim to rapidly gain an overall sense of the text paying attention to the title, introduction and key (topic) sentences in the paragraphs. In a well structured text each paragraph will have a sentence that expresses the main item or idea tackled in that particular paragraph. This is the topic sentence and will be dealt with in greater detail in Chapter 3 (3.3) and Chapter 6. Locating such sentences (they are often the first sentence) when skimming allows you to quickly build an impression of the main elements of the text's description or argument.

Scanning is used to quickly locate specific items of content relevant to your purpose. As with skimming you can use section titles and topic sentences to rapidly navigate your way through the text, but the emphasis is on finding particular pieces information rather than on gaining an overview of the text.

Such reading strategies are much more efficient ways of extracting the relevant information that will be recorded in your notes. If you own your own copy of a text then the addition of brief notes and descriptions in the margins can help to condense the information. However, again you should be clear on the purpose. Are you providing your own subjective commentary on the material or are you seeking to neutrally distil the main point(s) in each paragraph?

When listening to / watching (a lecture)

Compared to reading or listening to a recorded piece, taking notes during a live presentation can be a particularly challenging process. Without the opportunity to replay or re-read information the listener is under pressure to understand and record the salient points 'the first time around.' In other words the cognitive load during note-taking is substantial. There are a number of practical measures that will help ease that load and so increase your chances of accurately understanding the presentation and efficiently representing your understanding on the page.

Listen for verbal cues that announce particular kinds of information

When listening to a presentation such as a lecture, the introduction is a key moment in which the speaker will make clear the purpose and scope of the talk and may well give a detailed overview of the contents to come. Listen carefully for cues that will lead into information that gives an overview of the lecture, e.g. 'The purpose of my talk to day is to …'; 'This lecture will address three main questions …'.

During the main body of the lecture it is important that you can follow the path laid out by the speaker and can assess the relative importance of packets of information. Listen for statements that explicitly state importance, such as 'this is the central point,' 'it is important to understand that…, ' 'you should note this down,' etc. In addition, a speaker will often slow the pace or use repetition to give emphasis to key pieces of information.

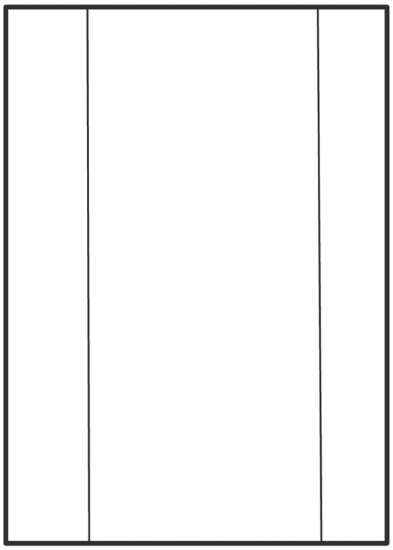
Throughout the talk the speaker will use words and phrases that link ideas in particular ways, in effect the signposts intended to guide you along the path of exposition or argumentation. Such terms might signal contrast ('but', 'however', 'on the one/other hand') similarity ('similarly', 'in the same way') express a time relationship ('previously', following on from') or indicate cause and effect ('consequently', 'as a result ', 'this led to …'). The table below gives a brief summary of functions and phrases common to verbal presentations. Moreover, additional examples of linking terms can be found in Chapter 3.

Function	Phrases
Emphasis	*the most important, more importantly, above all, it must be stressed, make sure you get this down/note this down*
Time	*before, after, previous, subsequent, meanwhile*
Addition	*also, in addition, furthermore, moreover*
Cause and effect	*as a result, so, therefore, thus,*
Contrast	*however, in contrast to, on the one/other hand, unlike...,*
Enumeration	*first(ly), second(ly) ..., finally, the following points/steps, next*
Example	*for example, for instance, an illustration of this is*
Reformulation	*in other words, put another way, that is*
Contrast	*but, yet, however, nevertheless, still*
Concession	*indeed, though, granted, admittedly*
Summary	*to sum up, in a nutshell, in conclusion*
State secondary importance	*as an aside, don't note this down*

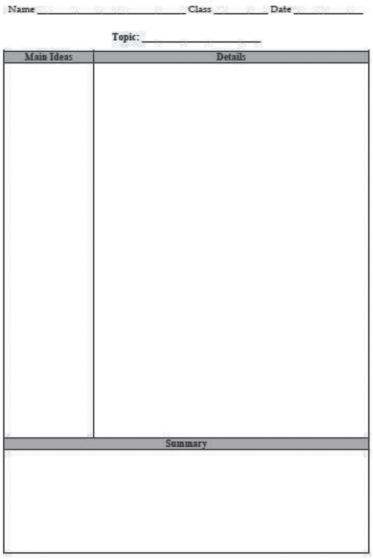
1.2 HOW TO NOTE IT DOWN – NOTE-TAKING FORMATS

The use of a format for taking notes can help you to become an efficient note-taker because with practice you will be able to write down information within a given structure that will aid your comprehension and retention of the content. An obvious place to begin is by dividing the blank page into sections. A simple example of this is the **double-margin** format (a) in which the main notes are taken in the broad central section of the page, while the margins can be used for adding comments, references, additional information, etc., after the talk or lecture. The simplicity of the design allows for flexibility, which makes this format useful for situations in which the material lacks a clear structure, for example taking notes from a discussion.

(a) Double margin



(b) Cornell



A popular format for note-taking in an academic setting is the **Cornell** system (b) in which the page is divided into three sections: two columns (with the right side broader than the left) and a small horizontal section at the bottom of the page. The system works as follow: (i) take notes using the broad right hand 'Details' column (ii) after the lecture re-read the notes and write down main points and/or questions that the information answers in the left hand 'Main Ideas' column. The section at the foot of the page is used to summarise the content of that page of notes. The advantage of this format is that there is a clear visual distinction between main points and more detailed information, and the process encourages the student to learn and reflect on the material. For example studying the notes might involve covering the right hand column and using the main points in the left column as cues to recall the detailed information which can then be checked in the right column. Moreover the summary box helps the writer to digest the information by condensing and reformulating the content.

As is illustrated in example (a) in the introduction, approaching note-taking as a piece of conventional writing (i.e. full words and sentences presented in a linear pattern) done at speed is inefficient and increases the danger of missing key pieces of information. Rather than attempting to copy every utterance, you should try to understand the idea that is being communicated. This process can be helped by writing information diagonally across the page. When dealing with highly structured material one can indent information at each level of scale or importance, as in the example below.

Feather topography:
A typical wing feather consists of a central, stiff shaft with the softer vanes on each side. The leading edge of the feather during flight is called the **outer vane**. The opposite vane is wider than the outer vane and is referred to as the **inner vane**.

In greater detail, feathers are broken down into the following structural elements.

Central shaft:
The central shaft of a feather is divided into two regions.

The **calamus** is the part of the shaft closest to the bird's body. It is hollow and does not contain any vanes.

The distal end of the central shaft is referred to as the **rachis**. The rachis is solid and is defined as the area to which vanes are attached.

Vanes:
The vanes extend from each side of the feather. A series of parallel branches called **barbs** make up the vane.

Extending from the barbs are a series of short branchlets called **barbules**. Tiny hooklets tie the barbules, and ultimately the barbs, together. This somewhat complex arrangement creates the strong but light structure of the feather. (adapted from, www.birds.cornell.edu)

Notes for the above text

Feather topography
- *central shaft*
  - *calamus: hollow, close to body, no vanes*
  - *rachis: solid, vanes attached*
- *vanes*
  - *composed of barbs*
    - *barbules extend from barbs*
    - *hooklets tie barbs + barbules = strong light structure*

A diagonal approach can also be used when distilling the ideas of a text by asking primary questions such as *Who did What, When and How* etc., and by marking connections in the narrative/argument (but, however, in particular, and so on). An example of this approach is given below.

In Chechnya, there have, it is true, been some recent moderately positive developments in response to international and European Union pressure: for example the recent ECHO mission was able to take place and western humanitarian agencies have greater access to the area. The conflict nevertheless continues and we still have considerable concerns.

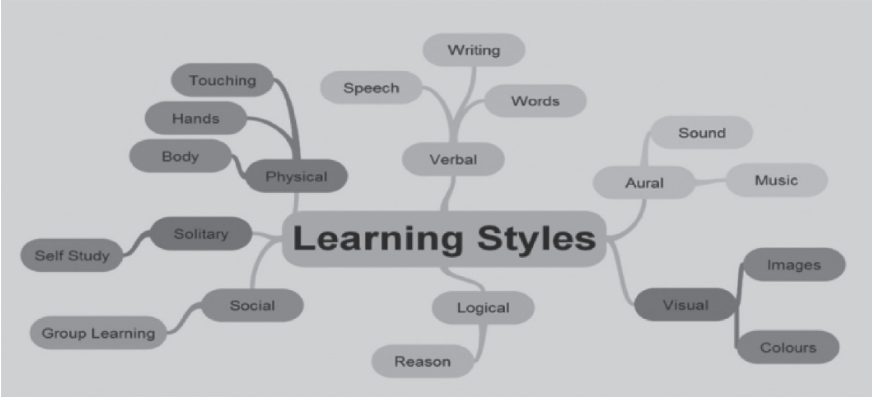
In particular, we want to see much greater access for humanitarian aid agencies.

Adapted from 'Interpreters note taking techniques' Krystallidou, D. Ghent University

WHAT Chechnya +ve devpts
eg ECHO mission
W. humanit. agencies ACCESS
HOW International EU Pressure
– – – – – – – – – – – – – – – – – –
BUT concerns bec conflict cntns
In prtclr more access wanted fr humanit. aid agencies

1.3 MIND-MAPPING

Mind-mapping is the technique of representing information in a visual pattern in which, typically, main points appear close to the centre of the pattern with finer detail placed further from the centre. In the diagram below types of learning styles (verbal, physical, etc.) are placed immediately around the central title, and activities and attributes that suit each style appear at a further remove.



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