



Book review: Bailey, S. (2025) *Academic writing: a handbook for international students*. 6th edn. Abingdon: Routledge.

Academic writing as a general skill: a useful starting point for international students

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International students represented a quarter of all student enrolments in the United Kingdom in 2023/24 (HESA, 2025). To support this significant cohort, there is a need to ensure that they have the tools to overcome potential linguistic and other academic barriers to their success. One such barrier for example, might involve relative inexperience with the kind of 'source-based writing' expected at English-medium universities, putting overseas students at a disadvantage when compared to their domestic counterparts (Sun and Soden, 2022). Stephen Bailey's *Academic writing: a handbook for international students* is an attempt to support international students pursuing English-language academic courses with a focus on developing the skills needed to write effective essays and reports. The book is aimed at undergraduate and postgraduate students with the rationale that the expectations of written work are broadly similar at both levels: fundamentally, writing should be 'clear, objective, accurate and correctly referenced' (p. xx). It is Bailey's aim to equip students with the skills they need to meet these expectations.

The book is structured into three parts: 'The Writing Process and Writing Skills' (designed for classroom use), 'Elements of Writing', and 'Writing Models' (created with self-study in mind). Part 1 is made up of 12 units that are 'best taught as a progressive series of lessons' (p. xxi). Part 2, made up of a further 12 units, focuses on discrete features of academic language. In contrast to Part 1, it is intended to be used flexibly, supporting students as and when needed, rather than sequentially. Similarly, the final part of the book

is designed to be consulted as and when relevant, with guidance offered on four widely used forms of academic writing: case studies, literature reviews, reports, and 'longer papers'. Given how vulnerable these types of assessments are to generative artificial intelligence (GenAI) misuse, it will be interesting to see the extent to which they remain the dominant modes of assessment in the years to come. The changing nature of how students approach their work is touched upon in this book. In its sixth edition, Bailey explains that it is '[f]ully updated, with sections on using AI and exploring electronic sources' (p. i). There is indeed a brief section at the beginning on GenAI, outlining several areas where AI can assist students in their work (p. xxvi). This operates as a useful disclaimer about the critical use of these tools and offers generally accepted principles around misuse. Aside from this brief disclaimer at the beginning, GenAI is not mentioned again.

Learning developers may choose to adopt this book to help inform a series of sessions, both with international students and their domestic counterparts. In my own teaching context, for example, we run writing courses that students from across the university can attend. The central, 'non-faculty' based nature of these courses means we need to cater for students from different disciplines, which aligns with the generic approach adopted throughout Bailey's book. The relative arguments for teaching a general Academic English versus a discipline-specific approach are well documented in the field of English for Academic Purposes (e.g. Bodin-Galvez, 2019), but logistics often dictate that a general approach is taken, particularly on pre-sessional programmes. Bailey alludes to the fact that there is variety in writing style across different subjects, but he prefers to treat academic writing as a distinct and roughly uniform genre, emphasising its difference to other types of texts, such as newspapers. This feels like a missed opportunity. I think even within a general academic writing handbook like this, there is scope to teach students how to conduct genre analysis, a general skill that students can then try to apply to their specific disciplines.

The units in Part 1 appear in an order that roughly matches the typical stages a student in higher education might undertake when completing an assignment. The unit on summarising and paraphrasing offers a flavour of the typical activities included in the book. Students are asked to consider the steps required when writing a summary and judge which of the two examples offers a 'better' reflection of the original text. Readers are then asked to complete a scaffolded summary of a text about videoconferencing, initially using

fill-the-gap skeleton notes of the key points, and then 'joining up' these notes to summarise the original text, first in 50 words, then in 30. The staged tasks of noting key points, putting them together, and then trying to edit them into a succinct summary are a helpful way to simulate the typical process students might go through in their work. There is, however, no reference provided for the original source, meaning there is no requirement for students to include a citation in their summary. Presumably, this is an attempt to reduce cognitive load, but it makes the activity feel a little less authentic. This is also not helped by the fact that students are given no purpose for producing the summary (such as an example essay question to answer or some research context). This is the case throughout the unit, with activities for paraphrasing also focusing on linguistic techniques, including changing vocabulary, word class, and word order. These are undoubtedly important strategies but as Alexander (2020, para.3) outlines, this emphasis on form over function 'directs students to focus on words in sentences rather than ideas in texts. The logical conclusion students draw is that paraphrasing involves staying within the prison walls of the source'. One way to address this would be to contextualise these skills within a given assessment task. Of course, this proposal introduces another potential trade-off: focusing on one discipline may reduce the appeal to students from other subject areas.

Part 2 is dedicated to specific elements of writing, including units on 'comparisons', 'nouns and adjectives' and 'passives'. Each one has a basic introduction and rationale for the content, and several helpful exercises to practise the target language of the unit, which could be completed alone or with a partner, as often suggested (with answers included at the back). '2.4: Nouns and adjectives', for example, aims to help students develop their vocabulary through increasing awareness of common academic nouns along with their related adjectives. Learning developers could use individual units with groups to address common writing issues or refer units to students for practice. I would, however, have liked to see more here to help students develop vocabulary learning strategies and consider further elements of what it is to know a word, rather than just meaning and word class. This could involve an explanation of different features of an example dictionary entry or advice on how to learn more about how words are used in context.

Overall, this book is a useful starting point for international students for whom academic writing represents a new challenge. If further editions are to be published, I would hope to see more focus on developing student autonomy to improve their confidence in academic writing in their own discipline, as well as a more embedded approach to dealing with the

affordances and challenges of GenAI. Despite these limitations, Bailey's handbook remains a useful resource with opportunities for learning developers to adapt and scaffold materials for their own context in order to make the most of them.

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