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THE LITTLE BLACK BOOK

Second edition

**A Manual of Academic Presentation Standards
for Students of the Faculty of Business & Law**

**Gordon Campbell
Management Communication**

**Victoria University
Footscray
January 2001**



FTS REF
808.06665 CAM
30001007082474
Campbell, Gordon, 1946-
The little black book : a
manual of academic
presentation standards for

First Edition published 1993
Second Edition published 2001

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Designing & DTP: Maria Capuano

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Printed in Australia by Paragon Rossprint Printing Company



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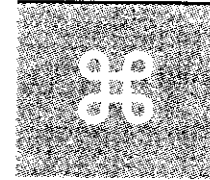
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FOREWORD TO SECOND EDITION

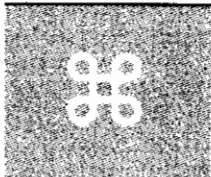
The purpose of this manual is to assist students in the Faculty of Business and Law (and possibly other students) in the presentation of their written and oral assignments.

Much of the material in the manual relates to the general academic standards required in all tertiary institutions. However, information on the specific requirements of particular subject areas within the faculty is also included.

My thanks go to a number of VU staff whose comments and constructive suggestions have contributed to both the first and second editions, among them Allan Miller, Louise Wilson and Beverley Lloyd-Walker. I am particularly indebted to Ken Billing, David Parker, Shane Carroll and Brendon Stewart for their assistance with the material on legal assignments.

I will be happy to receive feedback from staff and students about the relevance and usefulness of the material contained herein, as well as suggestions for improvements.

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INTRODUCTION

One of the inescapable facts of life in educational institutions is that all students eventually have to demonstrate to their lecturers and tutors that they have attained a certain level of mastery in each subject.

In other words, you may have a superb grasp of Economics, or Law or any other subject, but unless you can communicate your command of the subject matter to the people assessing you, they will fail you, or will not give you the marks you think you deserve.

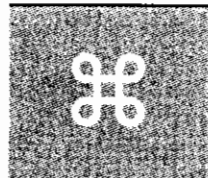
From their point of view, and it is an absolutely valid one, you have failed to prove that you have mastered the subject, because you have not conveyed your information and ideas clearly.

Thus, to be a successful student you must not only study the content matter of each subject but also develop the skills to demonstrate your understanding of that content to others.

This may seem unfair but, as we shall see, there are other reasons why students are asked to present work for assessment.

The required skills are of two main types:

1. The ability to communicate clearly, concisely and unambiguously. This involves both a sound command



of language and the ability to organise your ideas logically and effectively.

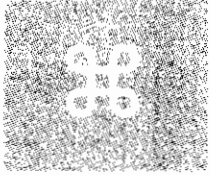
2. An understanding of the established conventions of presenting academic information. These conventions include highly detailed specifications about how to use references, footnotes and bibliographies to document the sources of your information.

The objectives of this manual are to clearly explain and to justify the above requirements. For example, many of the conventions of referencing may strike you as unnecessarily detailed and tedious. I will attempt to show why they are felt to be necessary, which is of course why they have evolved into conventions.

You should also bear in mind that the purpose of assessment activities is not simply to measure your achievement levels but also to help you to develop skills which are valuable in themselves.

To write an essay or a report, for example (be it in Law, Economics, History, Physics or any other subject) you will have to define a topic or a problem, seek and comprehend information about it, apply your resultant knowledge and understanding to the topic and then develop a line of argument or a set of recommendations. Even if you fail that assignment, you will have experienced a potentially rich learning activity by simply attempting to carry out those tasks.

Many people would argue, in fact, that what a university education really provides is not so much the knowledge



and expertise which you acquire in your given course, but rather the broader skills you practise and refine in pursuit of that knowledge.

The essay-writing skills mentioned above, for instance, are essentially transferrable and can be applied in many other fields of activity. What employer could fail to be overjoyed by a new graduate staff member who has the ability to analyse a problem, gather relevant information, evaluate several potential solutions and then present a strong, clear, reasoned argument on how best to resolve that problem!

Another vital function of assessment activities, including examinations, is to provide you, the student, with feedback about your progress. When your lecturer/tutor provides comments and corrections on the work that you have submitted for assessment, use that information to identify your strengths (which you should try to emphasise and deepen) and your weaknesses (which you should, of course, seek to correct and eventually eliminate.)

CHAPTER 1

Writing Clearly

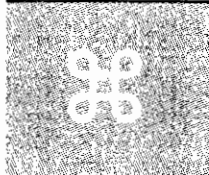
The most basic requirement, whether you are writing an essay, an examination answer, a case study report or any other document, is that your use of the English language should be clear, correct, concise, unambiguous and easy to understand. To make sure that your writing satisfies those requirements, these are the aspects that you should consider: words, spelling, sentences, punctuation and paragraphs.

Words

Every word you write should be the right word to explain what you mean. Therefore, make sure that you understand the meaning of every word you use. If a word or group of words means something else to your reader, your intended meaning will simply not be communicated.

Always keep a dictionary beside you when you are writing, and learn to respond to your "gut" feelings of uncertainty. That is, when you are not entirely sure, deep down, that the word you have written conveys exactly what you want it to, look it up in the dictionary, or use a thesaurus to find words of similar meaning. In the long run, if you persevere with this habit, your vocabulary will strengthen, and you will need to spend less time looking up words.

As a general rule, try to use short and simple words, rather than long and impressive-sounding ones. Your aim is to communicate clearly what you know, not to impress the reader with the size of your vocabulary.



Spelling

Likewise, learn to recognise when you are unsure about how to spell a word, and train yourself to check the spelling. Appendix 2 contains a list of 300 words relating to business and commerce that are commonly misspelled. Use it as a check if you are not sure of the correct spelling of words you use in your assignments. Add to the list every time you look up a new word, and every time a word is indicated as misspelled in an assignment returned to you by your lecturer/tutor. If you make no attempt to learn from each such mistake, you are highly likely to keep repeating it.

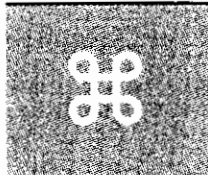
A word of warning about spell-checkers on computers: they are not foolproof devices which you can rely on to identify and actually correct any spelling errors that appear in your work. The spell-checker identifies errors and asks you to correct them, and in most cases it gives you a list of options to select from (which may or may not contain the correct spelling of the word you intend.) Worse, it does not identify all errors, only the ones which do not exist in its dictionary.

For example, someone may write:

"The instructions for using the machine were to complicated for them to understand, and as a result they infringed the reggulations."

This sentence contains two spelling mistakes.

The spell-checker will alert you to the fact that "reggulations" does not appear in its dictionary, but it will



not tell you that "to" should be "too", because "to" **does** appear in its dictionary. The spell-checker can be a useful ally, but beware of relying on it totally!

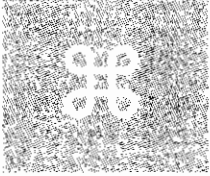
Sentences and Punctuation

All your sentences should adhere to the rules of English grammar and be correctly punctuated, or they will not make clear, unambiguous sense to the reader. There is not enough space in this manual to explain and discuss those rules at length, nor to show you how to use punctuation marks correctly. The Bibliography at the end of this booklet contains a list of textbooks which you can consult for further information.

You might like to learn to use the grammar checker on your word-processing program to assist you in this aspect, but bear in mind that it is merely a supplement, not a substitute for grammatical knowledge. To take advantage of a grammar checker, you will have to understand the terminology it uses to identify errors.

If your tutors are returning your written work with comments like "Meaning not clear", or if you are failing exams when you think you have answered questions well, it could well be that you need to polish up the effectiveness of your written expression. Ask your tutors why you are not getting the marks you think you deserve.

Most student writers improve the clarity and directness of their writing dramatically when they force themselves to write short, simple sentences.



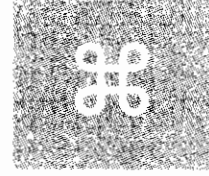
Paragraphs

Well-organised writing does not appear to the reader as long, unbroken chunks of prose. Rather it appears in sections, or paragraphs. It is impossible to define how long a paragraph should be, but a good rule of thumb is that it usually contains 2-6 sentences. The important characteristics of a paragraph are as follows:

- The sentences in it all relate to a particular point.
- That point is different from that of the other paragraphs in the document.
- That point is usually expressed in one of the sentences in the paragraph (which is called the Topic Sentence.) The other sentences in the paragraph support or develop the Topic Sentence, which most commonly comes first.

Obviously, the paragraphs which follow one another in a given document should all relate to each other and to the overall idea of the document. The linkages between them can be made stronger by using paragraph-transition devices. By this, I mean opening a paragraph with a sentence which refers back to the point of the previous paragraph, or closing a paragraph with a sentence which leads up to the point of the next paragraph. You can create these sentences by using words or phrases like "consequently", "furthermore", "however", "next", "in contrast", "although" etc. These words are, in effect, signposts for the keen reader.

Writing which is "stitched" together like this gives the reader the impression that you know what you are talking



about, and that you know how it all fits together. Also, if you have taken the trouble to organise it so carefully, it will be easier for the reader to absorb and understand as a whole. Sadly, the reverse also holds true; if you have not organised your material, the reader will find it that much more difficult to understand what you are trying to say.

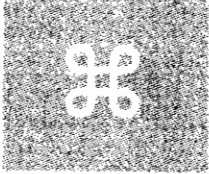
Proof-reading

You will not improve the effectiveness of your writing simply by reading (or even agreeing with) the material in this manual. The only way to improve your writing is to proof-read it carefully after you have written it and before you submit it for assessment. Proof-reading is a highly disciplined and controlled process of looking for errors and weaknesses and rectifying them. If you simply read through your work after you have written it, and you discover that you understand it, you are not proof-reading in the true sense of the term.

Even if it is badly written, **you** will probably understand it because you know what you were trying to say in the first place. This is no guarantee that anyone else will be able to understand it!

Some strategies for **real** proof-reading are as follows:

- Read it once, concentrating on word choice and spelling. Look only for those types of errors and weaknesses.
- Read it again, this time focusing on grammar, sentence structure and punctuation.

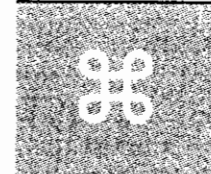


- Skim it a third time, looking specifically for evidence that the overall document is logically constructed and that each paragraph contributes to a coherent whole.

This will almost certainly be a more time-consuming process than you have been used to, but if you follow it strictly, it will work. After a time, you will discover that you can do it faster, and as you become more skilled you will probably be able to do it all in one reading, rather than three.

Try these tips for effective proof-reading too:

- Leave as much time as possible between writing and proof-reading. That way, when you come back to the piece of writing you will approach it relatively freshly, as another reader might.
- Read your work **aloud**. You will be amazed at the different perspective this will give you on your writing, and you will quickly detect where it is not working effectively. (When we read our own writing silently, we are probably tempted to skim it quickly, and to simply reacquaint ourselves with the ideas that were already in our head, rather than really reading the prose word-for-word. Reading it aloud forces us to slow down and read the actual piece of writing.)
- Read it aloud to someone else. Their feedback - positive, negative or confused - will help you refine your work and ensure a better final copy.
- Ask someone else to read it aloud to you. Once again, this forces you to confront your writing from a different perspective, and you will be better able to evaluate its strengths and weaknesses.



- Ask someone else to read it aloud to you. Once again, this forces you to confront your writing from a different perspective, and you will be better able to evaluate its strengths and weaknesses.

CHAPTER

2

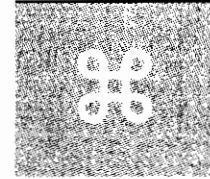
**Writing
Essays**

The type of essay you will be expected to write in the Faculty of Business is probably quite different from the essays you have written in secondary school. There, the emphasis has largely been on written expression of your own ideas, and students are encouraged to be quite creative and imaginative in the generation of those ideas. However, in a tertiary environment the emphasis swings towards the quality of the research that you undertake on a given topic. This is not to say, of course, that the quality of your written expression is now less important. Far from it!

Rather, tertiary tutors and lecturers simply assume that you have a competent command of the language, and they are particularly interested in how well you have been able to collect and organise information which is relevant to a particular topic. Furthermore, they are looking for evidence that you can interpret that information and use it to develop and support a line of argument.

The major purpose of this booklet is to outline the standards which you are expected to achieve when submitting work for assessment. This is not the place, therefore, to offer detailed information about how you should go about writing your essays. Moreover, everyone has different ways of reading, thinking, note-taking, planning and writing an essay. What works effectively for one may not work at all for another.

If you want a highly readable and useful guide to essay writing, I suggest you get hold of a little book called *Essay Writing* (Morgan 1991) available from the Melbourne



University Bookroom. The central point made by Morgan, which I endorse fully, is that you can approach the task of writing essays in whatever individualistic way you wish, but you must have some structured framework for the process.

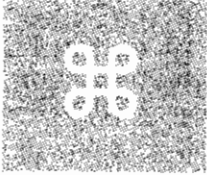
So, without trying to be dictatorial, here are some guidelines which may help you in attempting to develop your own framework.

Planning

Read the topic carefully. In particular, look for the key instructional words in the topic - the verbs - which tell you exactly what the lecturer or tutor wants you to do; words like 'explain', 'define', 'analyse', 'compare', 'evaluate' and 'contrast'.

Try to write a rough outline of an essay plan before you start your research. This may prove difficult or even impossible, but at least it will give you a focus for your reading. Instead of reading broadly and indiscriminately, you will be helping yourself to guide (and perhaps to reduce) your background reading. As you read more on the topic, you will very probably find that any plan you are working from needs amendment: new information added, some points removed perhaps, the whole thing re-ordered. Treat your plan as a flexible, working document, forever under review as you read more, as you discuss your ideas with others and even as you begin to write the first draft of your essay.

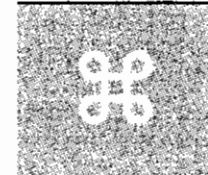
Here is an example of an essay plan on the general topic



of comparing the relative effectiveness of Australian and US unemployment benefit schemes:

Paragraph 1: Introduction:	Statement of aim - to examine details of each country's approach, to compare their effectiveness and to state a preference
Paragraph 2: Details of US scheme.	(a) No dole for school leavers (b) 26 weeks maximum
Paragraph 3: Details of Australian scheme.	(a) Virtually unlimited duration of benefits (b) No forced work or training
Paragraph 4: US system evaluated.	(a) Cheaper (b) Evidence that more stringent policies reduce unemployment
Paragraph 5: Australian system evaluated.	(a) More expensive (b) May actually encourage unemployment (c) Less poverty, less homelessness, less crime (d) Safer streets
Paragraph 6: Conclusion:	(a) Not just an economic argument (b) Must consider link between dole and overall social/cultural effects (c) On balance, Australian system is preferred

This is obviously not the only way this topic could be



approached, nor even the best way. However, it does show how a skeleton structure for an essay can be set up. Each of the points mentioned here would need to be expanded and to be fleshed out with facts, illustrative examples and supporting argument to produce the final essay.

Reading And Note-taking

Read intelligently, not randomly. Keep your plan (or your topic, if that's all you have at this stage) beside you as you read, and keep referring to it. It should guide and govern what you read and how you read it. Read with a view to supporting, contradicting or modifying the initial ideas contained in your plan.

Keep a note of the details (author, title, page no., publication details) of any idea you come across which looks interesting and relevant enough to include in the essay. This can save much time and effort later on, if and when you decide to incorporate the point in your ultimate essay. Then, as we shall soon see, you will be expected to indicate carefully where you have obtained some of your ideas from, and you will do this by recording all such information in your Bibliography or Reference List.

Writing A First Draft

Once again, my aim in this booklet is not to lay down explicit procedures for the whole process of writing an essay but I am urging you, as strongly as I can, to regard your first attempt at writing as a working document which will need revision. Unless you are an experienced and effective writer, it is highly unlikely that you can pro-



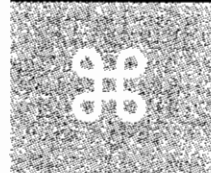
duce anything like your best writing without working through two or three drafts. For that matter, most experienced professional writers do write and rewrite their work, sometimes many times over.

Rewriting should not be regarded as a punishment or a humiliating admission that the first attempt has been a hopeless failure. Rather, it should be seen as a simply routine acknowledgement that the quality of your writing will improve considerably with careful editing. So, treat your first attempt at writing the essay as a first draft. This simple self-admission can be enormously liberating to you as you write that first draft, because it frees you from the horrible feeling that what you just wrote is rubbish, and you're going to have to submit it tomorrow and get marked on it.

Instead, sit back and relax with the comforting feeling that you've got something on paper. Maybe you're not entirely happy with it but you'll have a chance later to go back over it and polish it up. At this stage, it's far more important to let your ideas flow onto the paper, freely and fluently, even if they are a little confused. Often, too, the very act of writing something will help you to work out more carefully what it is you really want to say. It's much better to be faced with a page of ideas needing revision than with a blank page. And if your first draft is based on a half-decent plan, it probably won't need vast amounts of revision anyway.

Writing the Final Draft

Let's assume that you have written a first draft or perhaps a series of drafts. In between each draft, leave as much



time as possible, so that you carry out each new reading of the essay with a relatively fresh mind. You now feel that you are within sight of the best piece of work that you can muster. Remember that your final essay should have a structure something like the following:

Introductory Paragraph

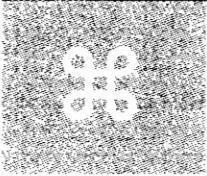
The main function of this paragraph is to introduce the topic, of course, and to state the thesis or line of argument you will be developing in the essay. Many writers find it too abrupt to begin with their thesis statement and prefer to arouse their readers' attention by use of a probing question, a surprising statistic or a thought-provoking comment, which will serve as a lead-in to the key statement of purpose. In the introduction you may also mention the scope of your coverage of the topic, the general nature of your discussion or a definition of key concepts in the essay.

Body

A series of paragraphs between the Introduction and the Conclusion. Each paragraph should cover a specific sub-point, and together they should constitute the weight of your argument and the supporting evidence you have gathered. The linkages between them should be made clear, so that they comprise a cohesive whole.

Concluding Paragraph

The concluding paragraph, like an introductory paragraph, should be kept brief. Don't simply repeat or sum-



marise the points in the body of the essay. It's a good idea to restate the thrust of your argument, but try to avoid repeating the thesis statement word for word. Just as the Introduction seeks to catch your readers' interest, try to leave them at the end, not only with a sense of something completed, but also with an appetite sharpened for further information. A dramatic prediction or a challenging question can serve this function. Do not introduce new information or new factual material in the conclusion.

Final Steps

In addition, there are other last-minute steps you can take to ensure that your work has the best possible chance of getting the marks you believe you deserve. See chapter 7 for a final checklist.

CHAPTER

3

Quoting from Other Writers Justification

As we have seen in Chapter 2, it is quite acceptable - even preferable - in a tertiary essay to borrow other people's ideas and use them in your writing. However, ideas are valuable commodities in the academic world, and therefore there are very strict rules about the ways in which such borrowing may be carried out. Essentially, these rules boil down to the principle that you cannot borrow ideas and present them as your own. You are expected to acknowledge the source of those ideas; in other words, you must say that you have borrowed them and indicate precisely where you have borrowed them from. This is known as "citing" your sources. Borrowing ideas without acknowledgement (known as plagiarism) is a serious crime in the academic world, and all universities have the power to apply penalties when it is committed. This University's policy on plagiarism is outlined in Appendix 3.

A second reason for citing your sources is to assist your readers. When you indicate where you have gained particular ideas from, any reader who is particularly interested in them may then track down the exact source document which you have consulted. Given the vast amounts of information that are available in the libraries of the world, and elsewhere, I am sure you will readily appreciate the need to be very detailed when specifying exactly where you have borrowed your information from.