

## Head start to university – part 4 - Communicating in your subject

Hi and welcome to the final video about getting a head start in preparing for university. As you can see from the title, this video is about communicating in your subject.

So, why bother improving communication skills? Well, firstly, communication is pretty fundamental to the expansion of human knowledge – from learning how to control fire to inventing the internet, for example. In that sense it sits at the heart of universities, whose whole business is the expansion of knowledge! But, when you enter your course, communication will be very important, you'll be entering a community, and as with any social community, communication is at the heart of it. The people within that community have normal ways of doing things, normal ways of communicating. So, if you think about the way that you communicate with your friends, versus the way that you communicate with a grandparent or an older person, there's probably some differences. If you think about how you write in a text message or an online chat versus how you might write in a work-related email, again you probably notice differences. These differences could be in vocabulary that you use, the level of formality, and in perhaps how complete your ideas need to be.

Well, it's the same at university. Every subject has its way of communicating which has developed among its community of experts over a course of time. And within that community, people understand their specialist vocabulary, they've established normal ways of speaking and writing, and as a newer member of that community, you'll need to adapt to that, and there'll probably be a bit of a period of adjustment while you become familiar and accustomed to the way of doing things.

But developing the way you communicate is more than just useful for university – it's an amazing tool that you can have in your life. Communication is really powerful. Good communicators can connect with other people – they bridge a gap, effectively, between themselves and the audience. They have a tool that they can use for convincing people, for shaping other people, perhaps through a strong argument or through an emotional connection. And the way that you communicate can give people an insight into you, into your mind. For example, if you produce a very structured piece of writing, your reader may interpret this as meaning that you have a good understanding of the topic and clearly organised thoughts. If you talk about something that the audience can relate to, then they may understand from you that you 'get them' and they may trust you more as a result. In this way, being a good communicator can be really empowering for you, and that's not to mention the fact that it also is highly relevant in many different jobs. In the 'knowledge economy', as we call it – which includes jobs in areas such as digital industries, professional and financial services and life sciences, which many of you will go on to work in – accessing and producing good quality information will be a foundation of your work.

So, for the rest of this talk, we're going to focus specifically on academic communication. Firstly, we'll look at what communication looks like at university and then at what you can do to develop your communication skills before you start your course.

You'll experience many different types of learning at university, and of course there will be lots of variation between different subjects. Most students will experience lectures and seminars; some of you will do labs, maybe problem sheets or practical classes; most students will have a lot of reading to do and extensive writing; and many will present their work orally. Naturally, of course, communication differs between these different contexts, but we're going to look at three main themes that run through all of them all. The themes are: format and style, accuracy and clarity, and academic voice.

So the first of those: format and style. This is probably most relevant to written communication when it comes to university. Most of you will be writing essays and reports, or perhaps written explanations or justifications for practical work that you've done. Different types of writing has different formats, so, for example, reports tend to be much more structured, the information is organised in such a way that the reader can easily pick out the main points, so they might use headings, for example. Essays are more exploratory in nature, they're often very – they're often still quite structured, but they have a little bit more flexibility and freedom in them in the way that you organise your writing. Once you start your course there will be plenty of opportunities to learn more about the subtleties of good academic writing, such as ways that you can order information to make your message clearer.

There is some variation between different subjects in the style of writing. Most academic subjects place very high value on concise writing, and because of this, students might be asked to condense down something that they've taken up a lot of space to write, maybe three paragraphs, and then they might have to condense that down into a single paragraph. Some subjects place very high value on eloquent and sophisticated writing. In these subjects, you might get into the habit of drafting, redrafting your work various times with the specific aim of improving the impact of your words.

At this stage, I want to make the point that – of course – you already may be very good at writing essays, reports or other types of academic writing. What we're talking about here is refining, professionalising the way that you communicate as you move in the direction of really becoming an expert.

As well as the norms we've already mentioned around format and style, academic communication should be accurate and clear.

If you listened to the previous talk about acknowledging, respecting and responding to the work of others, you'll have heard how evidence is used in academic writing. Providing evidence is a way of demonstrating that what you're saying is accurate, although of course you still need to be careful because just because someone has provided evidence it doesn't mean necessarily they have accurately represented and interpreted what the original author meant. Providing references that show the reader where they can go to find the original author's words is one way of allowing them to check the accuracy if they wish.

Clarity is also highly valued in academic communication. Very effective communication has a really clear message – it can often look quite effortless. In fact, it's only really possible to achieve a clear message when you are very clear in your own mind what you want to say. To be able to write a clear essay, for example, there's often a long process of reading, thinking, planning, drafting and redrafting that goes into producing a good, well-structured, clear piece of writing.

And, of course, accuracy and clarity are very important in all subjects – not just for those that write essays. If you are writing code, or keeping a lab notebook, or taking measurements or perhaps showing your workings for a problem, all of these require a high level of accuracy and must be completely clear both to yourself, but also to anyone else who needs to look at them.

A third feature of good academic writing, and good academic communication more broadly, is what we call 'academic voice'. This means that you, as the author of your piece of work, come through in your communication. As we've mentioned, academic communication involves drawing on information and findings, and the ideas of published experts. But in most subjects, that's not enough. Your own voice should also be present. So, what does that look like in practice? Well, you can't just give your own opinion. Let me give you an example of what I mean.

Imagine that you're a detective and you're trying to work out who committed a crime, ok? You might start by collecting various pieces of evidence, perhaps talking to the victim and witnesses, perhaps looking for fingerprints or other clues left at crime scene. You might look at CCTV footage, you might even interview any suspects. As you collect up your evidence, you'll start to weigh it and make judgments about how reliable it is and how relevant it is to the case. Through that process you'll come to a view of whether or not your suspect is guilty. And then, as you present that evidence to the court, you'll be making a case supported by evidence. So, in this example, your 'voice' comes through in the weighing and the interpreting of the evidence; it comes through in the justifications that you provide and – to a certain extent – even in the information that you choose to include or perhaps exclude. However, if you are a detective and you just turn up at court and say, 'I think the suspect did it', of course that wouldn't carry very much weight.

And that's very similar to academic communication. Usually, just giving your opinion is considered irrelevant and doesn't carry any weight. But collecting and weighing evidence, looking at the relevance and the reliability of the evidence, and making a case and justifying your viewpoint that you've reached by looking at the evidence is both acceptable and, indeed, encouraged. All of this is what leads to you being able to have a clear 'academic voice' in your communication.

So, before we continue, just a quick caveat. There are some subjects and some forms of writing and communication for which this isn't relevant. In many scientific disciplines, you will be required to write accurate explanations without any interpretation or without weighing any evidence. So, if you're ever unsure, please do just ask the person who set the task and they should be able to clarify what's expected.

So now that you know a bit more about what to expect from university communication, let's think about what you can do to start improving and preparing for it before you start your course.

The first thing is to become more aware of your strengths and weaknesses. You can do this by reflecting on your own levels or by trying to find out from others what they think. One way to do this is to look back at some feedback that you've received from your teachers over the past year or two; you could also ask friends and family if you've got people willing to give an opinion. It can also be helpful to write down your reflections and findings.

So, some of the areas you might want to think about are:

Firstly, spoken vs. written communication. Ask yourself which comes more naturally to you. Have you managed to improve in either of them over the years? Is it harder for you to understand spoken or written academic work by experts?

Next, think this question of voice. Do you have strong opinions? When you make arguments, are they generally based on reliable sources or are they based on something you've heard somewhere? Can you imagine questioning something that a published academic has written? And if not, what would need to happen for you to build the confidence to be able to question things with confidence and respect that academics have written?

Finally, clarity. Are you good at structuring ideas? How clear are your explanations?

As you become clearer about your strengths and weaknesses, you can start to work towards improving. Improvement comes from a cycle of practice, getting feedback or new input from things that you read and hear, and then gaining new understanding. And then that cycle continues as you do more practice, get more feedback and gain more understanding.

You'll have plenty of time to practise and get feedback at university, but you can already make some start on 'input' side of things and also in gaining new understanding. There are activities associated with this video, and they give you some suggestions of how to do this.

So, to sum up what we've discussed in this video: developing the way that you communicate is really worth doing as effective communication is so impactful. Your subject at university, like any community or group, will have its own norms and ways of communicating, including the format and style of communications, the level of accuracy and clarity expected, and the way that your academic voice is expressed. All of these can be improved through a process of practice, feedback and gaining new understanding.

So, if you've watched all or any of our videos, I hope you've found them useful and that they've given you a bit of a head start by helping you to understand what to expect from university-level learning and why universities do things in a certain way. I'd like to thank my colleagues Stuart, who you saw in the other videos, and then Kinga and Nicky, who've been working behind the scenes, for helping to prepare the Head Start content and the webpage. Feel free to come and say hi to us when you arrive at Royal Holloway – we all work in the Centre for the Development of Academic Skills and we'd be happy to meet you.

In the meantime, I hope you find the activities associated with this videos useful, and enjoy the rest of the summer!