



50 STEPS

to improving your
academic writing

Study Book

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Garnet
EDUCATION

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Introduction

Purpose of this book

50 steps to improving your academic writing is primarily intended for students who are new to or inexperienced in academic writing. It has been designed with one specific aim in mind: to provide the user with the skills and knowledge to write an essay in the context of university systems.

Principally, the book is a self-study book which students can use themselves in order to develop their skills. However, it may also be used in the classroom by teachers of English for Academic Purposes as part of a wider course.

Structure of the book

50 steps has ten units of five steps each. Each unit is based on a different aspect of academic writing. Details of these units, alongside a general overview of the topics which they cover, are presented below.

- **Unit A. Understanding academic convention**
Providing an overview of the key characteristics of academic writing.
- **Unit B. Researching your essay**
Analyzing the best strategies for gathering and recording background information.
- **Unit C. Preparing to write**
Focusing on what you need to do before you embark on your essay.
- **Unit D. Organizing your text**
Looking at the key principles of text and essay organization in academic English.
- **Unit E. Making your writing more 'academic'**
Highlighting key aspects of good academic style.
- **Unit F. Developing your writing style**
Helping you make your writing sound more professional and appropriate.
- **Unit G. Using functional language in your writing**
Presenting useful examples of language for specific functional purposes.
- **Unit H. Enriching your vocabulary**
Extending your understanding of key academic vocabulary.
- **Unit I. Improving your grammar**
Focusing on areas of grammar common in academic writing.
- **Unit J. Finalizing your writing**
Making your essay as good as it can possibly be.

Structure of each step

Each of the 50 steps has the same six parts, which are as follows:

- **A. Reflection:** Evaluation of your existing understanding of the topic through targeted questions.
- **B. Contextualization:** Demonstration of the importance and relevance of the topic through presentation of the learning point in context.

- **C. Analysis:** Explanation of the topic, delivered by answering the specific questions posed in part B.
- **D. Activation:** Application of what you have learnt through a range of test activities.
- **E. Personalization:** Provision of practical strategies which can be used to apply what you have learnt to your own academic writing.
- **F. Extension:** Indication of other steps in the book which may provide additional support. This also refers to the resource materials to be found at the back of the book.

The answer key to the questions posed in part D, Activation, can be found on pages 207–224. In addition, on pages 225–236 you will find a glossary, which will help explain key words and terms useful for academic writing. The resource materials on pages 237–272 include photocopiable documents, a range of additional information, extension activities and useful hyperlinks.

How to use this book

Each of the steps should take you approximately one hour to complete. Evidently, exactly how long you spend will depend on the precise details of the step and your existing level of knowledge.

The structure of the book means that you can decide how best to use it. If you are already aware of your areas of weakness in academic writing, and feel you only need support in certain key areas, then you should focus on those particular steps. If, however, you feel you need more support, it will be more beneficial to follow through the book from beginning to end.

However you use this book, it is important that you try to apply what you learn as much as you possibly can. Academic writing is *not* something which you can learn and then ignore. In order to improve your writing, you must constantly try to apply the knowledge and skills you gain.

How is writing different from speaking?

'If we spoke as we write, we should find no one to listen. If we wrote as we speak, we should find no one to read.'

T. S. Eliot

A Reflection

How is language used differently in speaking and writing?

- Write 'S' for words to use in spoken and 'W' for those to use in written English.

um S then ___ I mean ___ consequently ___ er ___ L8R ___

B Contextualization

What are the key differences between speaking and writing?

- By analyzing the 'spoken' text and the 'written' text below, both of which focus on the same subject matter, complete the column on the right.

Spoken text: Speaking is [pause] er something we learn without really thinking about it [volume drops] usually from our mums and dads, but writing is something we really have to think about. It is [pause] um an expertise not everybody has. [intonation rises] Understand? Let me put it another way. Loads of people still can't write [points finger]. Now.

Written text: Speaking is a skill which we develop subconsciously (usually from our parents). Writing, however, has to be consciously developed. It is an expertise which, surprisingly, many people still do not possess. This is true even in the 21st century!

Question	Speaking	Writing
How is the skill acquired?	Natural, unconscious process, usually from parents.	Conscious, time-intensive process, mainly at school.
How is the language joined together?	Simple LINKING DEVICES (e.g., <i>and/but</i>).	
How formal is the grammar?	Flexible.	
How can extra meaning be communicated?	E.g., BODY LANGUAGE , including HAND MOVEMENTS .	
How is emphasis created?	Changes in volume/tone.	
Is variety possible?	Different accents acceptable.	
How do you interact with the audience?	Audience is often known; can clarify meaning instantly.	
Can you change what you said?	No – you cannot delete speech.	

c Analysis

What are the different uses of language in speaking and writing?

In terms of language, speaking and writing differ in two main ways: the **method of delivery** and **level of formality**.

Method of delivery

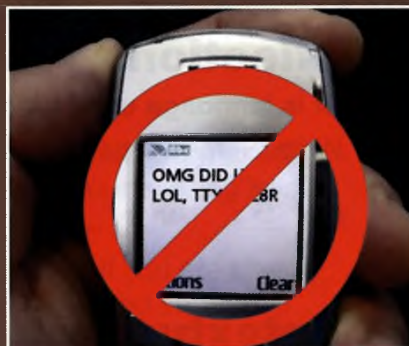
Speech is immediate and usually unplanned. As such, we need to gain time for thinking and we use fillers such as *um*, *er* and *I mean*. Writing can be edited and rewritten many times. Therefore, it has no need for such words.

Level of formality

Three historic languages have, in particular, given academic English the vocabulary which it has today: **ANGLO-SAXON**, **FRENCH** and **LATIN**. Words from the first are everyday words that are more likely to be found in speech (e.g., *then*). However, words from French and especially Latin are often a feature of writing (e.g., *consequently*).

Note: Text English

Text English – the abbreviated type of language which is often found in text messages and e-mails (and on Facebook and Twitter) – is unacceptable in academic writing. Although it is technically 'writing', many of its features are closer to speaking.



What are the major differences between speaking and writing?

How is the skill acquired?

As children, we acquire spoken language naturally, when we are exposed to the language of those around us, such as our parents. Writing, however, is a much more difficult skill to learn. The process is more complicated and takes a long time. This is why writing is often considered more important and prestigious. When learning writing in a second language, the process is even more difficult – so do not worry about your problems with English!

How is the language joined together?

Spoken language tends to use simpler forms of linking words (e.g., *and*, *but*), whereas written language typically uses more complex forms (e.g., *however*, *therefore*).

- Speaking: But writing is something ...
- Writing: Writing, however, has ...

How formal is the grammar?

Grammar has more flexibility in speech than in writing. In the majority of writing, you are expected to use full sentences which are 'grammatically correct' (i.e., every sentence must have a subject and a verb). In speech, this is not always necessary.

- Speaking: Now.
- Writing: This is true even in the 21st century!

How can extra meaning be communicated?

There are many ways to communicate your meaning in speech without using language (e.g., **BODY LANGUAGE**). Obviously, in writing, these techniques are not available. This means that your writing has to be as specific and clear as possible. In the example below, the writer has to use particular words (*surprisingly*) and punctuation (an exclamation mark – !) to do the same job as pointing a finger for emphasis.

- Speaking: Loads of people still can't write [*points finger*].
- Writing: It is an expertise which, surprisingly, many people still do not possess. This is true even in the 21st century!

How can specific emphasis be created?

In speech, there are a range of effects by which we can indicate **EMPHASIS**. These include:

- **VOLUME** (e.g., soft/loud)
- **PITCH/TONE** (e.g., rising/falling)
- **TEMPO** (e.g., slowly/quickly)

Speech	Writing
Voice gets louder	!
Tone rises	?
Pitch/voice drops	() or ...
Shorter pause	,
Longer pause	. or ;

In writing, we have to use punctuation to perform the same role. A brief comparison of the two media is presented in the table. The example below is from the text.

- Speaking: ... [*volume drops*] usually from our mums and dads ...
- Writing: (usually from our parents).

Is variety possible?

Spoken language varies greatly from region to region. Indeed, two speakers of the same language may find it very difficult to understand each other. To take the example of the word *about*: its written form does not change, but it can be said in different ways. For example, someone from London would typically pronounce the word as /ə'baʊt/ (to rhyme with 'shout'); a Glaswegian might pronounce it /ə'bu:t/ (to rhyme with 'flute'). Writing, on the other hand, is more standardized. Different types of English (e.g., **AMERICAN ENGLISH** and **BRITISH ENGLISH**) only have very small differences in spelling.

How do you interact with the audience?

When speaking, we almost always know who we are speaking to. In writing, however, our words might be read by anyone. Our audience, therefore, has to be considered more carefully beforehand, and **VAGUENESS** and **AMBIGUITY** must be avoided. In addition, when writing you only have one opportunity to make yourself understood, whereas in speaking you can explain yourself as many times as necessary. Here, the speaker is able to rephrase what they have just said, so that the other person can understand.

- Speaking: [*intonation rises*] Understand? Let me put it another way.

Can you change what you said?

Once something has been said, it has been said. It cannot be 'deleted' (though of course it can be clarified). In writing, texts can be edited and redrafted as often as necessary. In this example, the speaker tries twice to pronounce this difficult word correctly. When writing, however, he or she can look the word up in a dictionary, or use spellcheck, to get it right first time.

- Speaking: It is ... an expar- expertise ...

D Activation

The sentences below are all examples of spoken English. Rewrite them to make them more typical of written English.

1. 'Speaking and writing are really really different skills ... um ... there are three ways this is true – how they're learnt, what they contain, and how they're done.'

2. 'It's clear, isn't it, that yer grammar has gotta be better in writing.'

3. 'The main differences in speaking and writing [*intonation rises*]? Difficult question.'

4. 'Things don't really change in writing, wherever you are, but in speaking they can change loads.'

E Personalization

- In your mother tongue, discuss an academic subject with a friend.

- Record this conversation.
- Following this, write a short summary (c. 100 words) on the same topic.
- Compare the recording and the written summary, and identify the differences between the two.

- Review some of your previous writing. Does it sound more like speech? Can you identify any words which should not be there? In particular, you may want to check for:

- the influence of **TEXT ENGLISH**
- sentences which are not grammatically correct
- repetition of the same language
- informal linking words

F Extension

- Step 21 focuses on strategies for increasing the **FORMALITY** of your language – a crucial difference between speaking and writing.
- Step 43 analyzes punctuation – a skill specifically required for writing as opposed to speaking.
- Unit J (Steps 46–50) looks in detail at the issue of **PROOFREADING**, and how you can ensure your final written text avoids some of the problems listed above.

How is academic writing different from other forms of writing?

'Talent alone cannot make a writer.'

Ralph Waldo Emerson

A Reflection

What are the key characteristics of academic writing?

- Select the appropriate term – more or less – in the middle box.

Generally speaking,
academic writing

is *more / less* objective
uses *more / less* referencing
is *more / less* complex
has a *more / less* formal structure

than other forms of writing.

B Contextualization

Compare and contrast the following pieces of writing.

- On the left is an e-mail written by a student. On the right is an essay extract about the same topic.

E-mail (standard writing)

What is academic English?

Dear Professor Plum,
Please find below my answers to your questions.
I believe academic English and general English are different for the main reason that they have very different goals. Lectures and seminars need a different approach to general spoken English. And, of course, academic essay writing is not the same as standard writing.

I think there are 4 main areas where I can see big differences between standard writing and academic writing. They are:

- You should not be subjective.
- You should be more complex.
- You should have more structure.
- You should use academic style and systems.

Best wishes,
Sophia

Essay (academic writing)

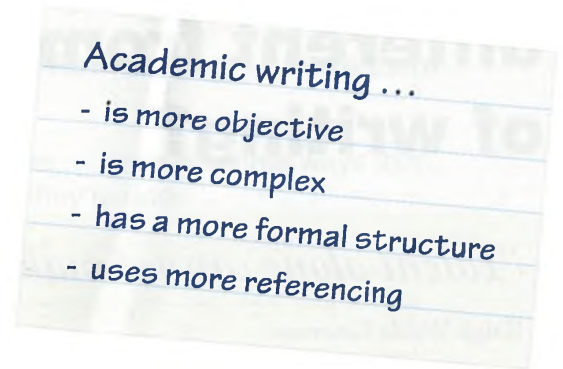
Characteristics of academic English

'Academic English' is differentiated from 'general English' in its focus on 'those communication skills in English which are required for study purposes in formal education systems' (Jordan, 1997: 1). Within these systems, there are three main areas of focus: the lecture, the seminar and the essay, each of which has a specific set of sub-skills which are required for successful performance. It is essays where the most significant distinction between academic English and general English is made. Generally speaking, there are four main areas where differences between standard writing and academic writing can be seen: the inherent objectivity of academic writing, its complexity, its formality of structure and its adoption of academic style.

C Analysis

What are the key characteristics of academic writing?

It is almost impossible to define good academic writing *exactly*. However, it is certainly possible to identify some key characteristics. The ones listed on the right are four of the most important features.



Academic writing is more objective

Phrases such as *I think*, *I believe* and *In my opinion* should not be used in academic writing. Academics are not looking for what you think or believe – they want to see what you can show, demonstrate and prove through evidence.

Three specific strategies for achieving **OBJECTIVITY** (illustrated in more detail in Steps 21–23) are outlined below:

- Standard writing: *I think there are 4 main areas where I can see big differences between standard writing and academic writing.*
- Academic writing: Generally speaking¹, there are² four main areas where differences between standard writing and academic writing can be seen³ ...

Strategy 1: HEDGING LANGUAGE (*generally speaking*) increases the ‘distance’ between the writer and the text, thereby creating more objectivity.

Strategy 2: Empty introductory phrases (*there are*) provide a platform for objective statements.

Strategy 3: The **PASSIVE VOICE** (*can be seen*) removes the need for a subject in the sentence. This can be particularly useful to avoid using *I*.

Academic writing is more complex

As a general principle, academic writing is more complex than other forms of writing. This is because academic writing often discusses difficult, challenging ideas which can only be expressed with particular grammar and language. Areas where this complexity may be seen include:

Formality of language

Academic language is more formal than the vocabulary used in other writing.

- Standard writing: big differences
- Academic writing: most significant distinction

Note

Do not mistake ‘complex’ and ‘complicated’. Academic writing should *not* be complicated. It should be relatively easy to follow, written in a clear, direct style.

Therefore, you should *not*:

- use long, difficult words which you do not understand.
- use difficult grammatical structures that you are not confident with.
- make strong statements about issues which you are unable to justify.

Grammatical structures

There are particular grammatical forms which appear more frequently in academic writing than other writing. For example: the **PASSIVE VOICE**, **NOUN PHRASES** and, as below, **RELATIVE CLAUSES**.

- Academic writing: A specific set of sub-skills which are required for successful performance.

Density of language

In the passage on page 11, the average number of letters per word of the e-mail is 4.8, whereas it is 5.4 for the sample of academic writing. This 'density' can be achieved through a greater use of **CONTENT WORDS** (such as verbs and nouns) rather than **STRUCTURE WORDS** (such as prepositions and conjunctions). In the example below, the adjective form found in general writing is substituted with a verb form in academic writing.

- Standard writing: Academic English and general English are different ...
- Academic writing: 'Academic English' is differentiated from 'general English' ...

Academic writing has a more formal structure

All writing has some kind of structure. The structure of academic writing is more formal than other types of writing. The following characteristics may be observed:

- The text as a whole has a specific, formalized structure – the **INTRODUCTION**, **MAIN BODY** and **CONCLUSION**.
- The text must have **COHESION** and **COHERENCE** – it must link together clearly so that it is possible to follow the writer's argument.
- Paragraphs should be roughly the same length throughout, so there is a good overall balance.
- Paragraphs often follow a similar structure – topic sentence, outline of argument, supporting evidence, short conclusion and transition to the next paragraph (see Step 18 for more detail).

Academic writing uses more referencing

Building on the ideas of other people is one of the central features of academic writing. In order to show where these ideas come from (and to avoid **PLAGIARISM**), a reference system is used (note: the reference system used throughout this book is the Harvard referencing style).

- Standard writing: I believe academic English and general English are different for the main reason that they have very different goals.
- Academic writing: 'Academic English' is differentiated from 'general English' in its focus on 'those communication skills in English which are required for study purposes in formal education systems' (Jordan, 1997: 1).

D Activation

Look at the following pairs of sentences. In each case, decide which is more typical of academic English, and explain why.

1a. I think that the first-person pronoun is not commonly used in academic English.

1b. The first-person pronoun is not commonly used in academic English.

Reason: _____

2a. There are a lot of scholars who argue that structure is important in academic writing.

2b. Scholars such as Shih (1986) and Canagarajah (2002) argue that structure is important in academic writing.

Reason: _____

3a. 'Hedging language' is never found in standard written English.

3b. 'Hedging language' is more likely to be used in academic English than standard written English.

Reason: _____

4a. Academic English has a higher lexical density and grammatical complexity than standard English.

4b. Standard English uses simpler grammar and fewer long words than academic English.

Reason: _____

E Personalization

Look at an essay you have written in your mother tongue.

- Compare this to a piece of your non-academic writing (e.g., e-mail, letter, report). What differences do you notice?
- Are these differences the same as or different from the ones in English?

Look at an essay you have written in English.

- Are there any aspects of it which are not 'academic'? How could you improve any of the 'non-academic' elements?

Read an article/book extract in your subject area.

- Identify examples of characteristics of academic writing (the passive voice, formality, hedging language, etc.).

F Extension

Steps 4 and 5 look at how you can use other people's ideas in your writing and **reference** appropriately.

Step 18 explains the characteristics of a **good paragraph** – a key component of good academic structure – while Steps 19 and 20 examine the introduction and conclusion.

Unit E (Steps 21–25) focuses specifically on strategies to make your writing more academic, particularly on: making your essays more **formal**, increasing the **objectivity** of your writing, using **hedging language** and structures and making your writing more **complex**.

What is plagiarism?

STEP

3

'Fine words! I wonder where you stole them?'

Jonathan Swift

A Reflection

Are there differences between how plagiarism is seen in your country and the UK?

- Tick if the statement reflects normal practice, put a cross if not, and a question mark if you are unsure. How can you explain any differences?

Statement	Normal practice in my country	Normal practice in the UK
I can use other people's original ideas without reference.		
I need to reference ideas which are commonly known or accepted.		
I can use/adapt the research of my friends.		
I can copy and paste information from the Internet into my essay without saying where it is from.		
I can submit the same piece of work twice, e.g., on a different course/module.		
I can pay someone to check through/proofread my essay to make minor improvements.		

B Contextualization

Which aspects of the original sources are plagiarized in the student's first draft?

Original sources

- 1 'Students were less certain about the concept of using someone else's ideas (Qu.1b), with 40% of students not acknowledging that this was plagiarism' (Dawson and Overfield, 2006).
- 2 'A similar point could be made about Chinese academic norms, which are the result in part of a long tradition of reproducing Confucian teachings in civil service exams. The philosopher's words were known by and belonged to everyone' (Sowden, 2005: 227).
- 3 'We need to strike a balance between being sensitive to students' feelings, understanding potential cultural differences, and being clear and helpful in the messages we give through our feedback' (Hyland, 2000: 381).

First draft of student writing

40% of students think that using someone else's ideas without reference is acceptable.

Often, it is East Asian students who find this a particular problem, because in the Confucian system knowledge is seen as something which is shared by society (Sowden, 2005).

It may also be a challenge for teachers when giving feedback, as they are often unaware of how to strike a balance between being sensitive to students' feelings, understanding potential cultural differences, and being clear and helpful in the messages they give.

C Analysis

How is plagiarism understood in the British university context?

If you come from a country whose university system is similar to the UK's, there may be many similarities in your answers on page 15. However, many countries have very different views about knowledge. These differences may be in areas such as:

- what the purpose of university education is
- where 'knowledge' comes from
- how 'experts' should be treated

These differences have a direct impact on the issue of plagiarism, and for many students this can be very confusing. It is important to emphasize that this does not mean one university system is better than another, simply that they are different. Since you are being assessed in an English-medium institution, you will need to understand and follow the procedures and practices of that institution.

'I can use other people's original ideas without reference.'

This is not normal practice in the UK.

Using other people's ideas without reference and pretending that they are your own is known as *plagiarism*. Plagiarism refers not only to text, but also to other people's words, data, diagrams, photographs, etc. Plagiarism is taken extremely seriously by the academic community. Punishment can range from a deduction of marks for your essay through to expulsion from the university. Nowadays, many universities use highly sophisticated computer programmes to detect cheating (such as Turnitin – www.submit.ac.uk), so if you do plagiarize, it is likely you will be caught.

Of course, you are expected to use other people's ideas in your writing. Quoting, paraphrasing and summarizing are the best ways that you can do this and avoid plagiarism. These skills are discussed in detail in Step 4 and Step 5.

Note

'Plagiarism is a form of cheating and a serious academic offence ... A substantiated charge of plagiarism will result in a penalty being ordered ranging from a mark of zero for the assessed work to expulsion from the College.'

Extract from the plagiarism statement of King's College London

'I need to reference ideas which are commonly known or accepted.'

This is not normal practice in the UK.

Information which is 'commonly known', as opposed to somebody's 'exclusive discovery', does not need to be referenced. Sometimes, however, it may be difficult to know which category information is in. Knowledge which is generally considered to be 'common' includes that which is well known in either your field of study or in the wider world (for example, it can easily be found in a general work of reference such as a dictionary or encyclopaedia). As a general rule, if you are in doubt, it is better to be cautious and provide a reference.

'I can use/adapt the research of my friends.'

This is not normal practice in the UK.

There are some types of collaboration which, as a student, you are allowed to do, such as group project work. Such work is performed together and credit is received equally. You may not use or borrow someone else's ideas without their knowledge, or even if that person gives you permission.

'I can copy and paste information from the Internet into my essay, without saying where it is from.'

This is not normal practice in the UK.

A distinction has to be made between 'searching' and 'researching'. At a British university, you are not assessed on your ability to find information, but rather on your ability to understand and process it. Be careful when downloading information from the Internet that you would like to paraphrase or quote in your essay. Mixing up your own words and original material is dangerous. This kind of **ACCIDENTAL PLAGIARISM** is treated just as seriously as deliberate plagiarism.

'I can submit the same piece of work twice e.g., on a different course/module.'

This is not normal practice in the UK.

This kind of plagiarism, often referred to as **self-plagiarism**, is also unacceptable. Every piece of work which you present for assessment should be unique.

'I can pay someone to check through/proofread my essay to make minor improvements.'

This is normal practice in the UK.

The key word here is *minor*. Normally you may use proofreaders to improve the grammar or language in your essay. However, as soon as the proofreader makes significant or fundamental changes to your essay – for example expressing his or her own point of view in 'your' essay – then plagiarism has occurred.

Essay-writing services: a warning

Using an essay-writing service – a phenomenon which has become increasingly popular in the last few years – is completely unacceptable. Since the overwhelming majority of essays which you can buy are already known to electronic software, you will be caught anyway, and the process will also have cost you a considerable amount of money.

Plagiarism in context

First draft of student writing

40% of students think that using someone else's ideas without reference is acceptable.

Often, it is East Asian students who find this a particular problem, because in the Confucian system knowledge is seen as something which is shared by society (Sowden, 2005).

It may also be a challenge for teachers when giving feedback, as they are often unaware of how to strike a balance between being sensitive to students' feelings, understanding potential cultural differences, and being clear and helpful in the messages they give.

Problem

This data comes from an original piece of research, and therefore the source needs to be provided, i.e., '(Dawson and Overfield, 2006)'.

This is, arguably, common knowledge. The basic principles of Confucianism are well known in academic circles (and can easily be found in a general reference book). Therefore, the source does not need to be acknowledged.

This is someone's original idea, and therefore needs to be referenced, i.e., '(Hyland, 2000: 381)'. The student has copied and pasted the author's words and provided no reference. This is clearly plagiarism.

D

Activation

Look at the following sentences and underline the correct statement.

1. Plagiarism **is/is not** considered to be a serious offence by universities.
2. If found guilty of plagiarism, you **can/cannot** be expelled from the university.
3. I **am/am not** allowed to copy and paste material directly from electronic sources into my essay.
4. I **am/am not** allowed to discuss my essay with a friend.
5. Universities **do/do not** have a range of electronic software to detect plagiarism.
6. I **have to/do not have to** reference every single fact in my essay.
7. If I pay someone to proofread my essay, he or she **can/cannot** change the content and ideas as well.
8. I **can/cannot** resubmit a piece of my work for assessment.
9. I **should/should not** use other people's ideas in my essays.

E

Personalization

- **Make a list of the differences which exist between the UK and your home country in terms of plagiarism. Knowledge of these specific differences will help you to avoid plagiarism.**
- **Go to the website of the university you are attending (or hope to attend) and read its plagiarism declaration form.**
- **Read through your last essay. Are there any parts in the essay where you feel:**
 - you have used somebody else's ideas without proper acknowledgement?
 - you have copied and pasted information directly from the Internet?If so, what strategies could you use to solve these problems?

F

Extension

- Step 4 and Step 5 focus on **QUOTING, PARAPHRASING, SUMMARIZING** and **REFERENCING**, which represent the main ways of avoiding plagiarism. In addition, Step 31 analyzes **reporting verbs**, which can be a useful tool for explaining what other people have said.
- Step 8 develops your **critical thinking skills**, so that you can manipulate, adapt and utilize your source material.
- Step 10 provides tips on **note-taking**. Good note-taking skills are one of the best ways to avoid accidental plagiarism.
- Step 14 extends your knowledge on **brainstorming** and **outlining**. These skills can help with your time management; poor time management is a major factor which results in students plagiarising.
- Appendix 4, Step 3 provides hyperlinks to the plagiarism statement from King's College London and to a plagiarism detection system website.