Small and simple ways to improve your academic writing

First published on the Facebook page of *A Beginner's Guide to Doing Your Education Research Project*: http://on.fb.me/QsLY2Q.

1. Reduce use of 'the'
2. 'Most', 'a few'
3. 'I' and 'my'
4. Alternatives to 'I' and 'my'
5. Balancing gender
6. Rhetorical questions
7. Abbreviations
8. '...ise' or '...ize'?
9. Semi-colon or colon?
10. Proof reading

1. Reduce use of 'the'...

The word 'the' is one of the most common in the English language. But reducing its use can make your writing not only more concise, but more accurate too.

Look at this sentence, for example:

"This study investigated the methods used by the teachers in one school to improve the ways in which the children behave in class."

The word, 'the', occurs four times. Now remove all of these:

"This study investigated methods used by teachers in one school to improve ways in which children behave in class."

The second version is better for two reasons:

1. It is more concise – less 'wordy'

2. It is also more accurate. The first version implies that the study will investigate all methods used by all the teachers to improve all the ways in which all children behave. In a small study, and even in a large one, this is impractical and unlikely to match the actual scope of the investigation. The second version, on the other hand, implies that the study will investigate some methods used by some teachers to improve some of the ways in which some children behave. This is
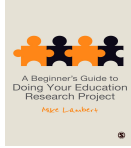
likely to reflect more accurately the nature of a small-scale investigation.

It is therefore worth examining your writing to see where, by avoiding the word 'the', you might strengthen your text in this way.

2. 'Most', 'a few'…

There will be many occasions when you will use these terms in your writing. However, when analyzing data in a research project, it is better to be much more exact. Take this sentence, for example:

"Most respondents agreed with the statement, but a few expressed other opinions."

Note how this is rather vague and does not help the reader to appreciate the exact strength of the findings. Here is a more precise alternative:

"Twenty out of 25 respondents agreed with the statement; the other five expressed other opinions."

With a larger sample of respondents (usually over 100), percentages could also be used:

"Eighty-five per cent of respondents agreed with the statement; the remaining 15 per cent expressed other opinions."

When presenting data therefore, avoid vagueness and generalisation. Instead, be clear, specific and exact.

See also *A Beginner's Guide…,* p.164 & p.183.

3. 'I' and 'my'…

One of the most frequent questions asked by beginner researchers concerns these two words. Is it acceptable to use them in academic writing?

There are good reasons both for using and for avoiding them. Using them allows the reader to appreciate the writer's personal identity; writing without them helps the researcher to maintain a more hidden and neutral position.

The first advice is therefore to think carefully about what kind of position you wish to present and to make your own decisions accordingly. Nevertheless, it
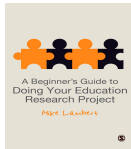
may also be worth consulting your course guidance or your project tutor to find out what is recommended in the context in which you are studying.

You could also follow the suggestion given in *A Beginner's Guide…,* p.190. Here it is:

'My view is that it is sometimes reasonable to write in this way [i.e. to use "I" and "my"], for instance when justifying your topic or evaluating your research (the project is yours, after all). In the middle sections, however, when writing about the literature, the investigation and the data produced, a less personalized style is usually preferable. In general, do not over-use "I" and "my" – find other ways of writing too.'

4. Alternatives to 'I' and 'my'…

Here are some forms of writing which avoid the use of personalised expressions such as 'I', 'my', 'we', 'our', if that is what you wish to do:

- The aim of this research was to…
- Personal experience of the researcher indicated that…
- Earlier research on this issue has indicated….
- Jones (2010) and Smith (2012) have both provided persuasive arguments of this kind…
- This researcher's personal view differs from opinions expressed in much of the literature…
- Three methods of data-collection were chosen for this investigation…
- A range of ethical issues arose in the planning of the research….
- This investigation has confirmed findings in other research on this issue…
- Outcomes of the investigation indicate…
- This report has argued that…

5. Balancing gender

English (unlike some other languages) differentiates between people who are female (she, her) and those who are male (he, his). This can create a problem for writers when they wish to indicate both genders, but find themselves having to choose between the two. Take, for instance, this sentence:

"A good teacher understands that his own behaviour is important."

The sentence implies that all teachers are male, yet this is clearly not true. Here are other ways in which the same sentence could be written to indicate more clearly that both genders are involved:
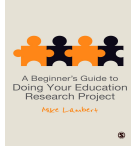
"A good teacher understands that her or his own behaviour is important."

"A good teacher understands that his or her own behaviour is important."

"Good teachers understand that their own behaviour is important."

In some circumstances, it is possible to use one gender for a particular group, then to explain early in the text that this has been done. For instance:

"In this report, for ease of writing and to strengthen anonymity, individual teachers are indicated as 'she' and children as 'he'.   However, both genders were present in each of these groups."

Whatever way you choose, seek balance between genders in your writing, unless there is a clear reason which you should indicate one gender and not the other.

6. Rhetorical questions

Rhetorical questions are questions which imply an answer, but that answer is not provided. The speaker is in effect asking the listener to agree with the unstated answer.

Such questions are a frequently used literary device, for instance those asked by Shylock in Shakespeare's 'The Merchant of Venice':

"If you prick us, do we not bleed?
If you tickle us, do we not laugh?
If you poison us, do we not die?
And if you wrong us, shall we not revenge?"

It is sometimes tempting to include this kind of question in a research project, when making an argument. For instance, in this draft text:

"This issue is clearly important. Should politicians and educationalists not be concerned about it? Surely they can see the dangers of ignoring it. Should they not do something about it as well?"

However in research, while it is certainly the researcher's task to ask questions, the answers to those questions should not be implied, but reached and then stated as a result of investigation. A good rule to follow, therefore, is to avoid rhetorical questions in a research project, and to include only three types of questions in the text:
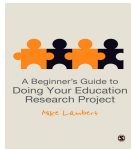
1. Your research questions, i.e. those you answer by doing your investigation (see *A Beginner's Guide…,* Chapter 5)

2. A question set within your text, which raises an issue and then answers it in some way. For example: "What should teachers do about this problem? Smith (2012) has suggested a range of strategies, such as…."

3. A question as a subtitle, which you address in your discussion in that section. For example, a subtitle in a literature review could be: 'Compulsory testing: needed or not?', followed by review of a range of views expressed in the literature on that debate.

7. Abbreviations

In the modern educational world there are many abbreviations, where letters (without full stops) stand for a longer title. Here are some widely used examples:

- SEN = special educational needs
- ICT = information and communication technology
- NFER = National Foundation for Educational Research

In some cases the letters are pronounced as a word – this kind of abbreviation is called an 'acronym'. For example: ESOL = English for speakers of other languages.

How should abbreviations be used in a written research project? Here are some basic rules to follow:

Do not presume that your reader understands the abbreviations you provide. Explain them the first time you use them. For example:

"This policy was adopted by the Government's Department for Education (DfE) in 2013."

"According to figures from the OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development),….

After this you can usually use the letters on their own, as your reader will then know what they stand for. An exception to this might be in a long written text, where the abbreviation has not been mentioned for some time. In this case, you may wish to remind the reader again what it means.
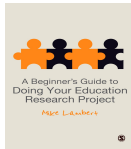
Very occasionally, however, an abbreviation is so well used that explanation is not needed, for example 'UNESCO', 'USA', 'VIP'. In these cases, you may decide that the letters are sufficient without further clarification.

8. '...ise' or '...ize'?

At the end of some verbs it is possible to write '...ise' or '...ize'. For instance:

- 'personalise' or 'personalize'
- 'analyse' or 'analyze'
- 'generalise' or 'generalize'

This extends to other forms as well, for instance: 'personalised' or 'personalized'; 'analysing' or 'analyzing'; 'generalisation' or 'generalization'.

What is the difference, and which is correct?

In general, the ending 'ise' is a British spelling; 'ize' is a North American spelling. However, in books and other material published internationally, the North American spelling is often used.

For instance, the publishers of *A Beginner's Guide...,* SAGE, used the American spelling, even though the book was written in Britain. This was because it was to be available internationally. An exception was the word, 'analyse' – its British spelling was retained, possibly because it is sometimes used in American settings too.

So if you are a student in North America, or in a country which uses American spelling, you should probably use the 'ize' version. If you are a student in Britain, you may have a choice about what to do. When you have made this choice, stick with it throughout your project. Be consistent – except, perhaps, with 'analyse'.

9. Semi-colon or colon?

A **semi-colon** is a dot over a comma. Here is one in the brackets [;].

A **colon** is a dot over another dot, like this [:].

They look very similar, but are used differently.

A semi-colon indicates a pause within a sentence, a rather stronger pause than that indicated by a comma. In fact with a semi-colon, the sentence could almost be written as two separate sentences. For example:
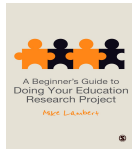
"Questionnaires were used to collect from staff across the school; a range of views were identified as a result."

Semi-colons can also be used to separate a list of items, in cases where commas are already present in that list. A frequent example of this in research writing is when providing several references to support an argument. For example:

"Inclusive teaching has been seen as one of the most important challenges facing education today (Smith, 2009; Jones, 2012; Brown, 2014)."

A colon on the other hand indicates that something will follow, usually an example or a list. Note that several have already been used in this text to indicate that an example will follow. Here is a colon which introduces a short list:

'Three elements were indicated in the data: agreement, disagreement and compromise."

Semi-colons and colons may look very similar, but using each in the correct way will strengthen the accuracy of your writing.

10. Proof reading

Proof reading means checking your work once it has been completed. This is a very important process – it allows you to improve the style and 'flow' of your writing and to remove mistakes in grammar, spelling, etc.

The process is not straightforward, however. When you have been immersed in your work for a long time, it is sometimes difficult to spot aspects which need improvement.

Here are some ways to overcome this:

- Take a break: Complete your writing, then forget about it for a few days. When you return to it, you will be able to read the text with a fresh mind and find weaknesses or mistakes which you did not notice before.

- Read out loud: Try reading some passages out loud to yourself – again you will find aspects which could be improved.

- Ask a friend: Find a friend who is prepared to read and check your text for you. Ideally this friend should be a frequent reader and accurate
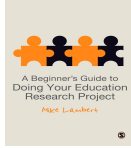
writer, but not an expert on the topic about which you are writing. This is because overall your text should be understandable to an intelligent reader who is not very knowledgeable in the chosen field. Finding someone like this to read through your text is a useful way of checking that your writing is appropriate in this way.

For more guidance on academic writing, see *A Beginner's Guide…,* pp.184-189.

More **support material** *on all aspects of your research project:*
https://wlv.academia.edu/MikeLambert
(You may need to register on the Academia website to access this material)

A Beginner's Guide to Doing Your Education Research Project*, by Mike Lambert, is published by SAGE*: http://bit.ly/143AhdA *and is available also on Amazon*:
http://amzn.to/1e9xges.

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Good luck with your project!

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