

**Institute of Development Studies
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**CRITICAL WRITING:
A GUIDE FOR IDS STUDENTS**

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1. Introduction

1.1 Objectives of the *Guide*

This *Guide* provides advice on the writing of student assignments, research papers and journal articles in an English-speaking academic environment. As the title suggests, the aim is to develop skills in what is often called ‘critical writing’.

The *Guide* is intended for two main user groups: mature students who are returning to university after many years in the ‘real world’ and so need to be reminded of the academic writing skills they learned as undergraduates, and students who come from other ‘cultures’, where styles of writing may be different. It was originally written primarily for students on IDS’s MA in Governance and Development programme. However, it should also be of use to other IDS MA students and possibly to some D.Phil. students and researchers in IDS’s various partner organisations.

There are numerous books on how to write essays and dissertations. A quick glance at the shelves of any university library or bookshop will give the reader some idea of the range and type of books available.¹ This *Guide* is intended as a complement rather than a substitute for such books. It focuses on the particular issues and problems faced by IDS students and research associates, who tend to come from other cultures and/or to have been working in a non-academic environment for some time before coming to IDS.

1.2 What is Critical Writing?

The term ‘critical writing’ refers to a particular style of writing, used predominantly in the academic world, in which the writer puts forward a ‘reasoned argument’ (Clanchy and Ballard 1983: 8) on a particular issue or topic, based on a ‘critical’ analysis of relevant information. The words ‘critical’ and ‘argument’ require some explanation here. In everyday usage, they tend to have negative connotations. A critical person is one who finds fault in others, while an argument is a heated verbal confrontation between two or more people, each trying to prove the other wrong. In the academic world, however, they are used to refer to processes of thinking and writing in which one reviews all available information and points of view about a particular issue and then, on the basis of this evidence, draws one’s own conclusions. It is this combination of reviewing existing information and expressing one’s own opinion that distinguishes critical writing, and the ‘argument’ is the ‘line of reasoning’ (Hutchison 2007: 65) that links the two.

¹ MA students are particularly recommended to look at a book called *Teach Yourself Writing Essays and Dissertations* (Hutchison 2007), which provides a clear and comprehensive guide not only to writing skills but also to other aspects of studying in an academic environment and is available in the IDS Library. Also recommended are Hart (2005) (also in the IDS Library), Clanchy and Ballard (1983), Fairbairn and Winch (1996) and, especially for those for whom English is a second language, Paltridge and Starfield (2007). The last three are available in the University of Sussex Library, which has a large collection of such books.

There are a number of generally agreed principles of good critical writing in the English language (Clanchy and Ballard 1983; Fairbairn and Winch 1996; Frost 1999; Hart 2005; Hutchison 2007). In particular, such writing should:

1. Focus on a particular issue or topic;
2. Provide a critical but objective analysis of available evidence and opinion;
3. Express the writer's own point of view, based on the above analysis;
4. Present the argument in a logical manner;
5. Present the argument clearly and concisely, using appropriate language; and
6. Provide adequate and appropriate evidence to support the argument, including full bibliographic references to relevant literature.

1.3 Structure of the *Guide*

The rest of the *Guide* is divided into four main sections. Section 2 compares critical writing with other writing styles. It considers two main factors that influence the choice of writing style: first, the purpose for which one is writing and, second, the cultural context in which one is writing. It emphasises that there is no one 'right' style, but that, when writing in English in an academic environment, one is expected to conform to certain norms and standards. Sections 3, 4 and 5 then look in more detail at the principles of critical writing outlined above. Section 3 examines the first three principles, which relate to the *formulation of an argument*. It explains why it is important to have a logical argument and discusses ways of utilising information obtained through reading or research to construct such an argument. Section 4 focuses on the fourth and fifth principles, which relate to the *presentation of the argument*. It emphasises the need to structure the paper in a clear, logical manner, to write clearly and concisely, and to choose one's words carefully. Section 5 addresses the last principle, which concerns the *support of the argument*. It emphasises the need to acknowledge the sources of one's information and discusses alternative ways of integrating source material into the text. The *Guide* concludes (section 6) with five simple tips for improving the quality of one's critical writing.

2. Alternative Styles of Writing

2.1 Introduction

There is no one 'right' way of writing. 'Academic' writing is only one possible form of writing and, within 'academia', there are variations in style from one part of the world to another. This section provides a brief review of, first, variations in style between different types of writing and, second, variations between different cultures.

2.2 Different Styles for Different Purposes

This *Guide* is designed to help in the writing of 'academic' material, such as essays, term papers, dissertations, academic research reports and journal articles. It will be of limited value for other forms of writing, such as professional or technical reports written by or for government officials, instruction manuals, policy statements or

political speeches, newspaper articles, advertising material, or fiction. The differences between these various types of writing lie not so much in the *content*, but in the *style of writing*. Differences in styles are necessary because different types of writing are designed to achieve different purpose and directed to different audiences. As Hutchison (2007: 107) says, ‘each of these styles might do its job well, but they would all be distinct from the others, and none ... would be quite the right thing for your essay’.

In some cases, the ways in which other types of writing differ from the ‘critical writing’ described in section 2 are fairly obvious. For example, political statements and speeches make no attempt to provide an objective or critical review of relevant information or to present a balanced argument. Since their aim is to persuade people to adopt or support a particular point of view, they present only that information that supports their case and use language that is deliberately biased or persuasive. Similarly, although newspaper reports vary in terms of the quantity, quality and objectivity of the information provided, they are usually based on more recent and often less well documented data than academic writing and written in a style designed to appeal to public interest and emotion. And novels make no pretence of being comprehensive or objective, or to present an argument in a clear or logical manner. Their aim is to tell a story and to do so in a way that will maintain the reader’s interest throughout. Imagine what it would be like to read a novel where the plot was summarised in the opening paragraph!

However, there are some types of writing that differ from critical writing in more subtle ways. One example is professional reports written by or for government officials. Although these reports draw on academic research and opinion and are expected to present a reasoned argument, they are designed for policy-makers, who have neither the time nor the inclination to read a detailed account of everything that has been written on the subject or to consider all possible points of view. They aim, therefore, to provide just enough information to justify the policy recommendations, which are usually the most important part of the report. Another example is the official reports produced by international organisations, such as UN agencies or the World Bank. Superficially these reports look like academic studies. They provide detailed analyses of relevant data, summarise academic debates, and include extensive bibliographies. The differences lie in the extent and form of criticism, the absence of personal opinion, and the choice of words and phrases. Unlike academic writing, which is designed to stimulate debate, their aim is to build consensus and minimise conflict or disagreement. Dunlap (1990: 71) refers to such writing as ‘the basic linguistic style of what we might call an international bureaucracy’. She maintains (1990: 15) that ‘the passive verbs, nominalizations, jargon and redundancies that characterize this style make it difficult to hold the writer responsible. This is “sponsored” writing and the sponsoring organization does not want to be held too responsible.’²

² It is important to distinguish between different types of report produced by international organisations. In the case of the World Bank, for example, these comments refer primarily (but not exclusively) to ‘official’ reports, such as the annual *World Development Reports*, rather than to the many technical reports and discussion papers.

2.3 Different Styles in Different Cultures

Within the academic world, there are also differences in style from one culture to another. The term ‘culture’ refers not just to language but to a complex of ‘linguistic, political, economic, social, psychological, religious, national and other’ characteristics (Cryer and Okorochoa 1999: 111) that determine the way in which people think, act – and write. Although language is an essential element of culture, it is not the only, or necessarily the most important, factor underlying cultural differences in writing style. When students or academics from non-English speaking backgrounds try to write in English, the problems they face are therefore more than just language problems.

The need to adopt different styles of writing for different purposes is fairly obvious and can be easily demonstrated. Cultural differences in writing style, however, are more difficult to identify and document and opinions vary about the nature and extent of the differences.³ Paltridge and Starfield (2008: 11) note that, while ‘many studies have found important differences in the ways in which academic texts are written in different languages and cultures’, others ‘have found important similarities in academic writing across cultures’. They conclude (2008: 12) that ‘it is important, then, not to take a stereotyped view of how students from one culture will necessarily write in another’.

However, there do seem to be some aspects of style where norms and standards in English-speaking academic environments are not necessarily the same as those in other cultures, and this can make it difficult for students from other cultures to adopt the basic principles of critical writing identified in section 1.2. Five types of difference, each of which relates to one of these basic principles, appear to be particularly significant:

1. *Critical analysis*: The second basic principle of critical writing cited above is that the writer should provide a critical analysis of existing information on the topic on which they are writing, especially published books and articles. However, some people find it difficult to criticise other people’s work, even in a constructive way. According to Cryer and Okorochoa (1999) and Smith (1999), this is particularly common among students from East Asian (or ‘Confucian’) cultures, where it is inappropriate to openly question or criticise anyone in authority and both teachers and their works are held in high esteem. However, Sillitoe and Crosling (1999: 169) suggest that the situation is similar in the Middle East, where ‘it would be unusual ... to commit a critical judgement of anyone to paper’. This reluctance is often reinforced, in East Asia and elsewhere, by didactic modes of teaching, where ‘the teacher’s role is not so much to problematize socially accepted

³ The literature on this topic is sparse and fragmented and there is much more information about some regions, notably East Asia, than others, particularly Africa. This section of the paper draws on four main sources: an analysis of experience in teaching overseas planning students in the US (Dunlap 1990), a collection of articles bringing together experience in teaching postgraduate students from ‘non-English-speaking backgrounds’ in the UK and Australia (Ryan and Zuber-Skerritt 1999), a handbook on the writing of theses and dissertations designed for supervisors of non-English speaking students (Paltridge and Starfield 2008), and a study by a North American psychologist of ‘how [East] Asians and Westerners think differently’ (Nisbett 2005). It also draws on my own personal experience of supervising non-English-speaking students, at IDS and elsewhere.

knowledge and recognise diverse interpretations of the truth, as to inform students of what they need to know' (Ballard 1995; summarised in Knight 1999: 96).

2. *Expressing one's own view:* The third basic principle of critical writing is that one should present one's own point of view on the issue in question. However, in some cultures this is considered inappropriate. Cryer and Okorochoa (1999: 111) note that many students from non-English speaking backgrounds 'feel it arrogant to assert their own opinions', while Nisbett (2005: 48) quotes 'an Asian expression that reflects a cultural prejudice against individuality: "The peg that stands out is pounded down"'. This trait appears to be closely associated with the deference for authority noted above, and sometimes also with a particular type of political culture. The example of China is often mentioned. Frost argues that 'one of the main aims of education throughout Chinese history has been to "combine the individual and the state in a harmonious whole"' (Frost 1999: 148; citing Cleverly 1985: 3). In countries with an authoritarian political regime, this trait may be reinforced by a reluctance to write anything that implies criticism of their governments for fear of retribution when the student returns home.
3. *Logical thinking and writing:* The fourth principle is that one should present one's argument in a logical manner. The term 'logic' refers here to a particular mode of thinking and writing in which one reasons along the lines of 'if A, then B'. Presenting one's argument logically thus means presenting it in a 'linear' or 'step-by-step' way; the various steps in the argument are presented one after the other, in a logical order, and the conclusions explicitly stated.⁴ However, this style of writing is not considered appropriate in all cultures. Dunlap (1990) describes three cultural styles in which the argument is presented in a circular rather than a linear fashion; she nicknames these the 'Arabic zigzag', the 'Hispanic meander', and the 'Asian spiral' (see Annex 1 for details). She maintains that in Latin American cultures it is considered 'blunt and crude' and in Indo-Chinese languages actually 'rude' to state the main point or argument explicitly (Dunlap 1990: 67, 65), while other writers suggest that in Japanese culture it is the responsibility of the reader rather than the writer to 'make the cognitive links within the text' (Sillitoe and Crossling 1999: 168, citing Hinds 1987; see also Paltridge and Starfield 2007: 12, 49).⁵ However, it is important to note that there may be other, less valid reasons for adopting a 'spiral' style of writing. As Dunlap (1990: 69) admits, it may also 'mask the writer's disorganization, as it does in our own culture'.
4. *Clarity of language:* The fifth principle is the need to write clearly and concisely. As Hutchison (2007: 108) says, there is a need to 'sound intelligent and well-informed' but 'be clear and comprehensible'. Dunlap (1990) maintains that some non-English-speaking students seem to find this difficult. They adopt what she calls a 'grandiose' style: 'inflated or overwritten language – things said in the

⁴ Some writers, including Dunlap (1990), use the word 'hierarchical' rather than 'linear' to describe this style.

⁵ Nisbett (2005: 165-90) maintains that there are major differences between western modes of thinking and reasoning, which are derived from Aristotelian logic, and East Asian systems, which are based on Confucianism and more 'dialectical' in character. 'Dialectical' reasoning 'focuses on contradictions and how to resolve them or transcend them or find the truth in both' (Nisbett 2005: 174).

longest, most elaborate way possible, a style that elevates words over ideas, thus obscuring critical thinking' (Dunlap 1990: 71). She suggests that, in some cases, this may be a reflection of the writer's native language. For example, she suggests that Spanish is characterised by the 'ornate digressiveness of [its] sentences'. Once again, however, she notes that there are other possible reasons for such writing, unrelated to culture, including 'the mystification of technical language', lack of self-confidence and 'the very fact of being in graduate school' (Dunlap 1990: 71-72).

5. *Providing supporting evidence:* The last principle of critical writing noted in section 1.2 is the need to provide adequate and appropriate evidence to support one's argument. This is something that all students have to learn, irrespective of their cultural background. However, some writers argue that students from non-English speaking backgrounds may have different concepts about what constitutes both 'adequate' and 'appropriate' evidence. Dunlap (1990) notes a tendency to make sweeping statements with little or no evidence to support them. She maintains that, while this 'could have been the result of haste or imperfect memory', it is 'so common' that it must reflect a more general belief that 'the abstract is more important than the concrete' (Dunlap 1990: 63). Nisbett (2005: 167-73) maintains that people from East Asian backgrounds tend to explain or justify things on the basis of experience or context rather than logical deduction, and this sort of evidence can be more difficult to substantiate. Some writers also suggest that students from non-English speaking backgrounds find it more difficult to summarise evidence from secondary sources because unfamiliarity with the English language makes paraphrasing difficult (Knight 1999: 98-99; Paltridge and Starfield 2008: 112-13).⁶

2.4 When in Rome

At this point, readers may be questioning the objectives of this *Guide*. Is the aim to turn everyone into academics? Is it part of a neo-colonial plot to impose English styles of writing on the rest of the world?⁷ This is certainly not the intention. The basic premise underlying this *Guide* is, as already indicated, that there is no one right way to write. The aim is merely to explain what sort of writing is expected when writing in English in an academic environment. A good writer is one who is able to adapt their style to suit the purpose for which they are writing. Adapting to different cultural styles is perhaps more difficult, but it is something that anyone who works in different cultures has to attempt. As a well-known English proverb says, 'When in Rome, do as the Romans do!'

⁶ Knight suggests that this may be due not only to language problems but also to the fact that 'the convention of indicating through citations the source of an idea or quote is a relatively new importation' (1999: 98). Paltridge and Starfield (2008: 112) cite evidence from China that disputes this, but they agree about the language problem.

⁷ Paltridge and Starfield report the case of a Polish graduate student, who 'fiercely fought to retain her personal and individual style of writing, but in the end found she had to give this away in order to pass' (Paltridge and Starfield 2007: 14; citing Prince 2000).

3. Formulating an Argument

3.1 Introduction

The concept of an *argument* is central to critical writing. As already indicated in section 1.2, the argument is what links the various data presented in the paper and the writer's own point of view. As Hutchison (2007: 65) says 'the argument of your essay is the line of reasoning which you use to use to make your point or explain your position'. But how does one identify and formulate such an argument? This section addresses this question. It begins by outlining a step-by-step approach, in which one starts by identifying the general focus of one's work and ends with a specific argument. It then discusses specific aspects of this process, notably the importance of a theoretical framework, the relationship between critical writing and critical reading, the role of hypotheses and research questions, and various ways of using case studies and examples.

Many of the points discussed in this section raise issues about research design and methods, which are beyond the scope of this *Guide*. The discussion here is limited to two types of issues: firstly, those that arise when one reaches the writing stage of a piece of academic research; and, secondly, those that arise writing an essay or other form of assignment in which the only 'research' involved is reading relevant secondary material and relating it to one's own experience.⁸

3.2 Determining the Focus

The first principle of critical writing defined in section 2.1 is that it should have a *focus*. In other words, it should address a specific issue, problem or question. The focus is important because it defines the scope of the work and is the first step in formulating an argument. In some cases, the focus may already be obvious. For example, in many student assignments the subject on which one is required to write is clearly stated. Similarly, if one is writing a report on a piece of field research, the subject of the research – and therefore of the paper - has already been determined.

Sometimes, however, the writer may have to determine the focus. For example, in some IDS courses, students are allowed to write a term paper on any subject relevant to the course, and in the case of dissertations, students choose their own subjects in consultation with their supervisors. In such situations, it is important that the subject is as *focused* as possible. Topics like 'the Paris Declaration', 'deepening democracy' or 'decentralisation', for example, are too broad. They invite the writer to say anything or everything about the subject, and this is likely to result in a vague, rambling paper with no clear argument. 'Focusing' a topic means deciding from what angle one is going to approach it. One of the best ways of doing this is to formulate the topic in the form of a question. Hutchison (2007: 44) advises students to 'construct a sharp, focused question that gives your work direction and provides some structure for your answer'. For example, one might refine the three topics cited above

⁸ For further information on research design and methods, see Hart (2005), Turabian (2007) or Van Evera (1997).

in the form of the following questions: ‘What impact has the Paris Declaration had on aid harmonisation?’ ‘What role can civil society play in deepening democracy?’ ‘What are the main problems of implementing decentralisation reforms?’

Note that the topic of a paper may relate to the subject in general or to specific cases. For example, depending on the circumstances, one may choose to write about the problems of implementing decentralisation in general or in one or more particular countries. Section 3.6 will look in more detail at this choice and at the implications of focusing on one or more case studies.

3.3 From Focus to Argument

The focus (or topic) of a paper determines its scope and direction. However, it is not the same as an *argument*. Formulating an argument entails adopting a ‘systematic point of view’ (Clanchy and Ballard 1983: 8) on the topic and ‘presenting *evidence* and *reasons*’ (Fairbairn and Winch 1996: 189) to support this point of view.

How does one progress from focus to argument? The argument is derived from an analysis of relevant information about the topic. This information may take various forms, depending on the type of paper. It may be derived from data that one has collected oneself (including formal research and more general personal experience) and/or from secondary sources (e.g. published literature). And it may take the form of broad generalisations and/or specific examples or case studies. An analysis of this information will suggest the conclusions that one will draw in the paper and also provide the ‘evidence and reasons’ needed to justify these conclusions. In other words, it will determine the ‘line of argument’. For example, if one is writing an essay on the problems of implementing decentralisation reforms, an analysis of relevant information may lead one to conclude that the main problem is the reluctance of central government politicians to relinquish control to lower levels of government because it would reduce their patronage power and it will provide the evidence to support this.⁹

The rest of this section looks in more depth at some aspects of the process of using information to draw conclusions and formulate an argument. Section 3.3 explains what is meant by the term ‘theoretical framework’ and its role in the process of formulating an argument. Section 3.4 emphasises the need to identify relevant secondary sources of information and read them in a way that will help formulate one’s argument. Section 3.5 looks in more depth at the formulation of research questions and the relationship between hypotheses and research questions. Finally, section 3.6 discusses the use of examples and case studies in formulating an argument.

3.4 Theoretical Framework

Mick Moore, in his unpublished paper entitled *Studying for an MA (Governance and Development) at IDS*, notes that: ‘Your teachers will tell you, rightly, that you should

⁹ If one is planning a paper and not sure what the line of argument is, it is often useful to start by doing a rough draft of the conclusions. This helps to clarify one’s thinking and to identify relevant evidence and decide how to organise it to support the conclusions.

expect to have *theories* in your term papers and final Policy Paper. But they are not always good at telling you why, or how to recognise theory when you meet it.’ (Moore 2008: 6) This section of the paper looks briefly at what the term ‘theory’ means, why it is important – especially in formulating an argument, and where to go to look for relevant theoretical material. It does not discuss any of these issues in depth. Readers who require more information are recommended to look at Moore’s paper and, if necessary, at one of the many textbooks on this subject.¹⁰

Although the word ‘theory’ is used in many different ways, it may be broadly defined as an explanation about the way in which the world (or some part of it) works. As Van Evera (1997: 7) explains, ‘theories are general statements that describe and explain the causes or effects of classes of phenomena’. There are, as Moore (2008: 6-8) points out, many different types of theories. For example, in the field of development studies, there are theories about the causes of inequality between nations, the relationship between governance and economic growth, the impact of decentralisation on poverty reduction, and so on.

Theory plays an important role in critical thinking and writing. As Moore (2008: 6) explains: ‘Theory is an instrument. It should help you answer the question(s) you are exploring in your paper.’ It also constitutes an important part of the information needed to draw conclusions and formulate an argument. Even if the main aim of a paper or report is to analyse and present primary data (i.e. data based on one’s own research or experience), it is essential that these findings be related to other research and writing in this field of study, and in particular to relevant theoretical material, since this will help to explain the ‘wider picture’. As Hutchison (2007: 156) says, ‘learning from other thinkers and writers is what studying is all about’. There should be a two-way relationship between one’s own research, experience or thought and the more general ‘theoretical’ work of others. The theoretical material helps one to define the issue or problem with which one is concerned and identify possible explanations or solutions; in other words, it provides the *theoretical framework* for the study. One’s own findings or reasoning are then used to support, expand, refine - or possibly even refute – the theoretical work.

How does one find appropriate theoretical material? The usual starting point is to look for literature on the topic that is the *focus* of one’s study. Thus, to go back to the earlier example, if one is writing an essay on the problems of implementing decentralisation reforms, one should look for literature on this subject, especially material that attempts to draw conclusions regarding the main problems and their causes. This will provide the theoretical framework within which to explore one’s own particular findings or experience, or (if one does not have any primary data) secondary data on a specific case study.

3.5 Critical Reading

It is evident from sections 3.2 and 3.3 that a review of relevant literature is an essential part of the process of critical writing and that it is particularly important in determining the theoretical framework. Students often ask if a theoretical framework

¹⁰ For example: Hart (2005); Van Evera (1997).

is the same as a literature review and some books on academic writing, especially those designed for short essays and papers rather than dissertations and research reports, use the term ‘literature review’ rather than ‘theoretical framework’. The two concepts are actually related but different: a literature review provides the basis for the theoretical framework, but one may also review literature for other purposes – for instance, to obtain information about specific examples of the phenomenon one is studying, the particular case study one is researching, or the research methodology one intends to use.

When reviewing literature, it is essential to read both *selectively* and *critically*. *Selective* reading means identifying relevant items of literature and focusing on those parts of these items that are relevant to one’s topic. Fairbairn and Winch (1996: 18-21) provide some useful tips on this, including using the ‘organizational features’ of a text (such as the contents page, abstract, introduction or index) to identify relevant parts, ‘reading at different levels’ (i.e. skimming through some sections and reading others more carefully), and ‘having specific questions’ related to one’s own work in mind when reading. *Critical* reading means thinking critically about what one is reading, rather than accepting everything that the writer says. As one reads, one should ask questions about the quality of the data presented, the validity of the conclusions drawn, and the objectivity of the line of reasoning on which the conclusions are based. One should also compare this particular text with other material that one has read. Do the writers agree? If not, what are the main differences and which argument is the most convincing, and why?

It is advisable to take notes when reading, rather than either just reading or simply highlighting relevant passages. Taking notes helps one to understand the text and record one’s own thoughts and ideas (Clanchy and Ballard 1983: 43-47; Fairbairn and Winch 1996: 28-30; Hutchison 2007: 55-57). It is also useful when it comes to the writing stage – a point to which we will return in section 5.4.

3.6 Hypotheses and Research Questions

A hypothesis may be broadly defined as a ‘conjectured relationship between two phenomena’ (Van Evera 1997: 9). In other words, it is a possible explanation or conclusion regarding the topic of research. For example, if one were exploring the problems of implementing decentralisation reforms, one might suspect that reluctance to give up power was the main problem and so design the research to test this ‘hypothesis’. The hypothesis could be derived from a review of relevant literature or one’s own experience – or, most likely, a combination of the two. The relationship between this hypothesis and the findings of the research (which could prove the hypothesis to be valid, invalid or valid under certain conditions) would then constitute the basis of the ‘line of argument’ of the report or dissertation.

Research questions are more open-ended than hypotheses, in that they allow for a number of possible answers, or conclusions. However, they should be framed in a way that gives some indication of the range of possible answers one is likely to get, and therefore the line of argument of the report or dissertation one will eventually write. In other words, the researcher has a number of vague, possible hypotheses at the back of their mind when designing the research. Thus, if one were investigating

the problems of implementing decentralisation reforms, one would have a range of possible problems in mind and seek to determine their relative importance.¹¹

3.7 Use of Examples and Case Studies

In section 3.1 it was noted that, when selecting a topic on which to focus, one may choose to look at the topic in general or to focus on one or more specific cases. There are actually three main options: a general study, a study of one case, and a comparative study of two or more cases. This section looks briefly at the similarities and differences between these three options and at the implications for the structure of the argument.

The similarities between the three options are greater than one might at first think. Thus, as already indicated in section 3.3, even if one chooses to focus on one or more particular cases, one must relate these cases to some wider experience. In other words, one must have a theoretical framework. And conversely, if one chooses to do a general study, one will still have to refer to specific examples to illustrate the points being made. In fact, in development studies most theories are based on, or derived from, an analysis of specific cases.¹² Consequently, if (as in the second or third options) one adopts a case study approach, one may still make passing references to other examples in the theoretical part of the paper.

The differences between the three options lie in the aims of the study, which determine the role of the case studies and therefore the line of argument. In the first option (a general study), the aim is to develop, refine or modify a theory by analysing and interpreting a wide range of secondary data. In the second option (a case study), the aim is to examine the relevance of a theory to a particular case. This may entail testing the relevance of the theory to the case or analysing the case and then reviewing the theory in the light of this analysis – or some combination of the two. The third option (a comparative study) is similar to the second. However, it is more complex, in that the aim is to examine the similarities and differences between the two cases and then use this analysis to review or refine a theory. This approach is particularly useful if one is seeking to explain the reasons for, or the conditions under which, a theory may or may not apply.

To illustrate the differences, let's return to the example of the problems of implementing decentralisation reforms. In the first option, one would refer to a wide range of material covering as many different countries as possible, since the aim would be to draw general conclusions about the main causes of the problems – for example, to conclude that the main problem is resistance from national politicians, who will lose much of their patronage power. In the second option, one would use this

¹¹ Research questions are generally regarded as alternatives to hypotheses and are used in situations where the researcher does not have a clear preconceived view about the likely findings of the research. However, some research proposals include both research questions and hypotheses. In such cases, the hypotheses are used to indicate the most likely answers to the research questions.

¹² The relationship between research and theory can take two forms: a *deductive* approach starts with a general hypothesis and then collects data to test its validity, while an *inductive* (or empirical) approach starts by collecting data, from which general conclusions are then drawn. The latter approach is more common in development studies. For more information on types of theories and their formation, see Van Evera (1997).

general material to formulate a hypothesis about the main causes (for example, to suggest that resistance of national politicians is the main factor), and then look at experience in a particular country to see to whether this hypothesis is valid in this particular context. And in the third option, one might look at two countries where there are problems, one in which the main reason is resistance from national politicians and one in which another factor (such as lack of capacity at local level) is more important, and seek to explain the difference.

How should one decide which option to choose? In the case of a research project, this is an integral part of the process of designing the research and the choice depends on a variety of factors regarding the nature and scope of the research. However, in the case of a short assignment, such as an essay or term paper, the main factor to consider is the information available. It is particularly important to consider whether one has sufficient, relevant information about a particular case (for example, about the problems of implementing decentralisation reforms in a particular country) to include a case study.

4. Presenting the Argument

4.1 Introduction

The fourth and fifth principles of critical writing (see section 1.2) refer to the need to present one's argument in a logical manner and to do so clearly and concisely, using appropriate language. This section of the *Guide* considers various ways in which these principles can be achieved. It discusses the overall structure of the work, the particular role of the introduction and conclusion, appropriate use of the English language, and finally the abstract.

4.2 Structure

As Hutchison (2007: 59) notes, 'markers often complain about poorly structured essays'. But what is a well-structured piece of writing? In an English-speaking academic environment, it is one in which the argument progresses logically from one section to the next and this logic is made clear to the reader. To quote Hutchison again: 'every essay should try to present a logical progression which leads the reader through the material towards the key idea or conclusion' (Hutchison 2007: 65). In order to do this:

1. *The material presented should be relevant to the argument.* This means that one has to be selective. One should not try to include all the information one has collected or to 'include data or information just because it is interesting, entertaining or took a long time to find' (Hutchison 2007: 65).
2. *The material should be presented in a logical order.* One cannot generalise about what this order might be - apart from the obvious fact that there should be an introduction, followed by the presentation and analysis of data, and finally a conclusion - since it will depend on the nature both of the paper and of the material. The most important point, perhaps, is that one should have a *plan* (i.e.

an outline of the structure) before starting to write (Clanchy and Ballard 1983; Hutchison 2007). Clanchy and Ballard (1983: 53) advise that planning should be seen as a continuous process, which begins when one starts to investigate the topic and then is constantly revised both before and during the writing process. ‘As you write’, they say, ‘you will be constantly shifting ideas and information about in your head, and on paper, to see where they best fit’ (Clanchy and Ballard 1983: 53). One of the most difficult structural choices to make is how to combine general or theoretical and case study material. Should one present the general or theoretical material first and then the case study, or try to interweave the two? My own experience suggests that the former is generally easier.

3. *The material should be divided into sections and sub-sections, but these subdivisions should fit together to form a coherent whole.* The writing of a paper may be compared to the construction of a building, in that it is made from individual building blocks, which are combined into sections and sub-sections. The basic building block is the *paragraph*. Clanchy and Ballard (1983: 23) suggest that in academic writing the paragraph should be seen as an ‘idea unit’, which is ‘coherent in itself’ but also contributes to ‘the logical continuity of the argument’. Each paragraph should, therefore, present a different idea or point, or a different dimension of an idea, and overlap or duplication of ideas between paragraphs should be avoided. Similarly, each section or sub-section should contain a different set of ideas, or a different dimension of the argument, and overlap or duplication between them should again be avoided. However, as in a building, it is essential that the various building blocks are in the right place, and so fit together to constitute a coherent whole; otherwise the edifice will fall apart. In other words, one must also ensure that the various sections and sub-sections of the paper are linked together.
4. *There should be ‘signposts’ to help the reader follow the logic of the argument.* It was noted in section 2.3 that, in English-speaking academic environments, the writer is expected to help the reader to follow the argument. There are various ways of doing this. The introduction and conclusion, which are discussed in section 4.3 below, are of particular importance. However, other devices include: cross-references between sections; connective words and phrases (such as ‘however’, ‘nevertheless’, ‘moreover’, ‘on the one hand ... on the other hand’) that link sentences and paragraphs; headings and sub-headings; and numbered or ‘bulleted’ lists (Hutchison 2007: 74-78). The last two tactics should be used selectively. In some forms of writing, such as reports for government officials, they are used extensively; in fact, in some cases each paragraph is numbered. However, in academic writing they tend to be used more sparingly.¹³

4.3 Introductions and Conclusions

The introduction and conclusion are, as indicated above, of fundamental importance in the presentation of the argument in any piece of academic writing. However, they

¹³ Note that, since this paper is intended to be a set of practical guidelines, I have tended to use more headings/sub-headings and numbered/bulleted lists than I would in, say, an essay or journal article.

are also often the most difficult parts to write. Hutchison explains the problem so well that I will quote her in full. She says (2007: 82):

There is an age-old maxim for formulating an essay plan, which goes like this: Say what you are going to say. Say it. Say what you have said. These three instructions relate roughly to your introduction, your main argument and your conclusion. This approach is fine up to a point. ... However, and it is an important however, your introduction and your conclusion should do much more than simply say what you are going to say and what you have said. Taking this approach too literally will leave you with a very flat and passive essay which seems to do nothing more than go round in a circle. What you really want are powerful, concise, interesting sections, which highlight the main themes and outcomes of your work. Both your introduction and your conclusion should provide an overview of your material, but the introduction should do so in a way that opens up the discussion or investigation, while the conclusion should do so in a way that provides some sort of closure.

The introduction is probably the most difficult to write. The problem lies not so much in the structure of the section but in the content. In terms of structure, the introduction should normally include some background information about the topic, the particular issue or question that the paper addresses, some indication of the main findings or conclusions, and a brief overview of the structure of the paper. In terms of content, there are three main challenges. The first is to give the reader enough information to 'set the scene' or (as Hutchison puts it) 'open up the discussion', but to do so concisely and without duplicating what will be said in subsequent sections. The second is to avoid sweeping, unsubstantiated assertions or generalisations. This can be difficult because there are usually many different, and often conflicting, authorities on an issue and one cannot summarise all of them in a couple of introductory sentences. One needs a carefully worded generalisation that clearly indicates the extent and variety of opinions on the topic. The third challenge is to give the reader sufficient information about one's findings and conclusions to convey the main line of argument, but not to say so much that there is no need for them to read any further – and nothing left to put in the conclusion.

The concluding section is somewhat easier. The main challenge here, as already suggested, is to highlight the main findings and conclusions. If the paper presents the findings of primary research or a case study, the concluding section should discuss the relationship between these findings and the wider general or theoretical literature, as explained in section 3.6. And if the paper has policy implications, it should discuss these implications and, where appropriate, make recommendations. It is however, important that policy recommendations are both detailed and practicable. Exhortations, such as 'the central government should transfer power to local authorities' or 'bilateral aid agencies should not consider their own political interests when determining aid priorities', are both vague and impracticable. They are vague in that they do not specify exactly what needs to be done and they are impracticable in that they ignore political realities. If one cannot say more than this, it is probably best not to make any recommendations at all.

When should the introduction and conclusion be written? One might think that the introduction should be written at the beginning and the conclusion at the end, but it is

seldom so simple. As suggested in section 4.2, the writing of a paper should be seen as a continuous process, in the sense that one should have a rough plan before one starts but be prepared to review and revise it as the writing progresses, and this has implications for the introduction and conclusion. As a general rule, I would suggest that, at the start, one should write a first draft of the introduction and a very rough draft of the possible conclusions, and then, after writing the main part of the paper, one should write the concluding section in detail and, finally, review and revise the introduction.

4.4 Use of English

Advice on the appropriate use of the English language can be found in any book on writing skills.¹⁴ This section considers a number of issues that are likely to be of particular importance for writers from non-English speaking backgrounds and/or non-academic environments. They are:

1. *Simplicity*: One of the best tactics for presenting an argument clearly is to write simply. As Hutchison (2007: 108) says: 'Being able to explain an idea simply is often a sign that somebody really understands what they are talking about. Your marker will be delighted to see complex ideas presented in plain English. They will also notice if you dress up weak thinking in flowery language.' In order to write simply, one should:
 - State points clearly and directly, rather than in a roundabout way;
 - Avoid unnecessarily long or complex sentences;
 - Use words that are widely understood;
 - Avoid unnecessary technical language or 'jargon'; and
 - Use acronyms sparingly.¹⁵
2. *Conciseness*: It is also easier for the reader to follow the argument if one writes concisely. A 17th century naturalist is reputed to have said: 'He that uses many words for explaining any subject, doth, like the cuttlefish, hide himself for the most part in his own ink' (Ray n.d.). Concise writing also enables one to say more with the same number of words, which is obviously an important consideration if there is a word-limit to the paper. Tactics for writing concisely include:
 - Avoid unnecessary repetition, both within and between sections;
 - Combine two short sentences into one (provided, of course, that the new sentence is not so long that it is difficult to understand);
 - Avoid using many words when one will do; and
 - Replace phrases with words that have the same meaning.Annex 2 gives two examples, cited by Dunlap (1990: 71-72), of concise writing.

¹⁴ See footnote 1 for examples.

¹⁵ An acronym is a word made from the initials of the phenomenon to which one refers; e.g. UNHCR for United Nations High Commission for Refugees; NESB for Non-English Speaking Backgrounds. There is no problem in using an acronym if it is well known (e.g. UN, UK) or if the phenomenon concerned is a major topic of discussion in the paper. However, excessive use of unfamiliar acronyms makes it difficult for the reader to follow the argument.

3. *Neutral writing*: ‘Neutral’ writing is writing that is not biased or prejudiced and so does not encourage the reader to draw particular conclusions. Good academic writing should present information as objectively as possible, so that the reader can make an independent judgement. As indicated in section 2.2, this is one of the main ways in which academic writing differs from that used by journalists and, in particular, politicians, who use language to manipulate public opinion. Fairbairn and Winch (1996: 172-88), in a section entitled ‘Illicit ways of persuading others’, give a number of examples of ‘non-neutral’ writing that should be avoided. They emphasise the need to:
 - Distinguish between facts and opinions, including the writer’s own opinions, which should be clearly indicated as such;
 - Avoid the use of emotive language (i.e. language that arouses particular emotions or prejudices); for example, words like ‘terrorist’ and ‘freedom fighter’, which may be used to describe the same person but have totally different connotations;
 - Avoid persuasive or misleading words or phrases, such as ‘obviously’, ‘undeniably’, ‘it is evident that’ and ‘it is a fact that’.
4. *Accurate use of words*: The need to use words accurately may seem so obvious that it is not worth mentioning. However, when writing in a second language, and sometimes even in one’s own language, it is tempting to use words that sound more or less right or that one vaguely understands, without first checking their actual meaning. As Hutchison (2007: 110) says: ‘If you have the slightest doubt about a word, look it up or leave it out’.
5. *Which tense?* When writing in a second language, it is always difficult to know what tense to use, and in academic writing the problem is compounded by some odd conventions. Two of these warrant particular mention. Firstly, when reporting the results of a survey or investigation, it is normal to use the past tense rather than the present. The reason for this is that, even if the survey was undertaken very recently, the situation may have since changed; the survey should be seen as a ‘snapshot’, which reflected the situation at that particular point in time. Secondly, when reporting or quoting the work of another writer, it is normal to use the present tense (for example, ‘Hutchison says’ or ‘Fairbairn and Winch argue’), even if the work was written some years ago. Only in a few cases (for example, if the work is very old or no longer available, or the writer no longer alive) is the past tense used.
6. *Which person?* Similar problems arise when deciding which ‘person’ to use when writing. Traditionally, academics were expected to use the third person (he, she, one, they); the use of the first (I, we) or second person (you) was considered inappropriate. However, this can be cumbersome and sound awkward. For example, in order to avoid the use of the first person, one has to use phrases like ‘It is this writer’s opinion that’, while avoiding the use of the second person tends to result in excessive use of the pronoun ‘one’. Therefore, many writers now advocate a more liberal approach, particularly regarding the use of the first person.
7. *When to use capital letters*: The use of capital letters varies significantly from one language to another. For example, capitals are used much more in German than in English, while in some languages (such as Japanese) there is no distinction

between ‘upper case’ (i.e. capital) and ‘lower case’ letters.¹⁶ Moreover, even in English, there are variations in usage, both between organisations and among individuals. However, in ‘academic’ English, capitals are generally used sparingly and only when referring to specific things. For instance, one uses a capital G when referring to the government of a particular country (e.g. the Indian Government), but not when referring to governments in general.

4.5 Abstracts

In many forms of academic writing, including journal articles, research reports, dissertations, and many essays and term papers, the writer is expected to provide an *abstract* (also known as a *summary* or *synopsis*) of the work. The main purpose of an abstract is to give prospective readers some indication of what the work is about and, therefore, whether it is likely to be of interest or relevance to them. The expansion of online information services has increased the importance of abstracts, since they can be easily posted on a website. Since abstracts are obviously designed primarily to facilitate access to published material, students may wonder why they are expected to provide them in essays and term papers, which are unlikely ever to be published. There are two main reasons. Firstly, it introduces students to the concept of an abstract and gives them practice in writing them. And secondly, it is a way of ensuring that they are clear in their own minds about what they have written – and that what they have written hangs together in a coherent manner. It is difficult to provide a concise summary of a rambling piece of work that lacks a clear structure or argument.

Many people are confused about the difference between the introduction and the abstract. This is understandable, since they both come at the beginning of the work and they cover much of the same information, including the objectives, methods, findings and conclusions of the study. However, their role is very different. The introduction is an integral part of the paper; its aim is to give the reader the information needed to follow the subsequent argument. The abstract, on the other hand, is designed to be read independently of the main paper and so must ‘stand alone’. Consequently, it is placed right at the beginning of the paper, before any table of contents or other preliminaries, and it must provide an overview of the whole paper.

The length of an abstract is often prescribed, particularly in the case of journal articles. The appropriate length depends on the length of the paper, but most are probably between 100 and 500 words. Abstracts tend to be written in a particular style. They normally use the present tense and the third person and, since the aim is to convey the maximum amount of information in a small number of words, they are written as concisely as possible. Some include introductory phrases, such as ‘The paper presents’ or ‘The study concludes’, but many exclude such preliminaries.¹⁷

¹⁶ I have not come across this point in the literature. It was not until a recent discussion with a Japanese student that I became aware of it and its implications for students.

¹⁷ Paltridge and Starfield (2008: 155-59) provide detailed guidelines on the writing of abstracts for dissertations, including examples of alternative styles.

5. Supporting the Argument

5.1 Introduction

The last of the six principles of critical writing proposed in section 1.2 is that one should *provide adequate and appropriate evidence to support the argument*. In academic writing, all factual statements and assertions should be justified by reference to appropriate sources of information. As already emphasised on several occasions, this does not mean that one should not express one's own opinions; it merely means, firstly, that one must make it clear that these are one's own opinions and, secondly, that such opinions should be based on an analysis of the evidence one has already provided.

The information to support one's case comes from two main sources: primary and secondary. Primary data is information that one has generated oneself. It may be obtained in a variety of ways, ranging from structured surveys to participant observation or *ad hoc* reflections on past experience. Secondary data is information obtained from 'secondary' sources, such as books, journal articles, published and unpublished reports, policy statements, newspaper articles and the internet.

The importance of primary and secondary data in critical thinking and writing and their role in formulating an argument have already been discussed in section 3. This section looks at ways of incorporating such material into a report or paper. It considers four main issues: the selection of material; the quality of the material; integration of material into the text; and acknowledgement of sources. In each case, the discussion looks both at general principles and at any specific issues and problems that may arise in relation to either primary or secondary data.

5.2 Selection of Evidence

When deciding what evidence to provide in support of an argument, one should be selective, choosing information that is relevant to the issue under discussion and that helps to develop one's argument. However, it is also necessary to provide a sufficient amount and range of information to ensure that the conclusions or opinions drawn from the evidence are not biased or prejudiced. This is particularly important when deciding which literature to cite, since there are likely to be a number of different viewpoints on an issue or topic. The challenge is to acknowledge the range of views that exists while at the same time supporting one's argument. Hutchison (2007: 159) expresses this well. 'Try to offer a similar weight and quantity of evidence on each side of the debate to build a balanced essay.' she says. 'However, remember that your job is always to evaluate, to analyse and to come to a conclusion. You are pulling the strings, so select and present your material carefully, to show the breadth of your knowledge and to move towards your conclusion.' In some cases, one may achieve this objective by combining primary and secondary data, or general and case study material. For example, one might provide a balanced summary of general literature and then present some primary data or a case study that tips the balance of the argument one way or another.

5.3 Quality of Evidence

The evidence provided to support one's argument should be sufficient in quantity and quality to justify the conclusions and opinions drawn. Moreover, it should be obtained from reliable sources and presented accurately. These principles may seem so obvious that no more need be said. However, they give rise to a number of problems that merit brief discussion.

In the case of primary data, the main concerns relate to the scope and accuracy of the data. Is the sample size large enough? Do the interviewees represent an adequate cross-section of the population? Can one draw valid conclusions from one or two case studies? Is one's own personal experience sufficiently objective? These are questions that should obviously be addressed when designing a research project and they raise broader issues regarding research methods that are beyond the scope of this *Guide*. However, even in a well-designed piece of research, it is inevitable that when one gets to the writing stage, one finds that some of the data one needs is missing or is not as representative or accurate as expected. This does not necessarily mean that one should not use such data or that one should not attempt to draw any conclusions from it, merely that one should use it cautiously. It is particularly important that such data limitations are noted in the text and that any conclusions drawn from them are qualified or regarded as tentative.

In the case of secondary data, there are two main concerns that warrant mention. The first relates to the reliability of the sources. This used not to be a major issue, since most secondary sources consisted of published 'academic' literature, such as books and journals, which are subject to some form of peer review. In recent years, however, two other major sources of secondary data have appeared. One is the large volume of publications produced by international organisations, such as UN agencies and, in particular, the World Bank. As pointed out in section 2.2, these publications resemble conventional academic studies in many ways, but they tend to be less critical and objective. The other, more problematic, new source is the internet. As Hutchison (2007: 53) points out: 'There are many interesting and scholarly pieces of work on the internet. [But] There is also a lot of superficial and inaccurate information.' It is particularly important to distinguish between online versions of published material, which are valid sources of information, and material that is only posted online.¹⁸

The second area of concern relates to the need to present material accurately. It is essential that references to secondary data are accurate and do not misrepresent the information or opinions expressed in the original source. It is particularly important to avoid 'quoting out of context'; that is, using other people's findings or conclusions to justify the same conclusion in a different situation or to draw a different conclusion. For example, one should not use a statement about the quality of local government in one country to justify similar conclusions in another – or about local government in general. And if the statement is qualified in any way, the qualifications should be noted and taken into account when using the quotation to support one's own argument.

¹⁸ The IDS Library offers short courses in the use of the internet for academic purposes.

5.4 Integration of Material into the Text

The evidence provided to support one's argument should be an integral part of the paper. It should be fully integrated into the text, so that it relates directly to the points being made and does not break the natural 'flow' of language.

In the case of primary data, the main problems tend to arise in the presentation of statistical data. Such data is usually presented in the form of tables and diagrams and the challenge is to integrate these into the text. As Hutchison (2007: 95) says, 'these are not substitutes for text'; they are 'there to illustrate and support your text.' It is particularly important to:

- Introduce the tables or graphs into the text, using phrases such as: 'Table 1 shows that ...', 'This is demonstrated in Table 2, which ...', or 'As Figure 1 shows, ...';
- Design tables and graphs in a way that brings out the main points that one wishes to draw from them; and
- Highlight the main points in the text, but not to repeat all the data in the tables and charts.

In the case of secondary data, the situation is more complex, since there are several different ways of incorporating information from secondary sources into the text and each has its own problems. There are three main ways:

1. *General references*: The term 'general references' is used here to refer to situations where one wishes to note relevant sources but not to discuss them in detail. One may make such references either by introducing them directly into the sentence (e.g. 'Hutchison (2007: 160-61) provides some useful advice on this topic') or by simply putting the reference in brackets at the end of the sentence or paragraph. If the second method is used, it is important that the reference relates directly to the point made in the sentence and that, if more than one reference is cited, they all make the same point or represent the same point of view (Hutchison 2007: 160-61).
2. *Paraphrasing*: Paraphrasing means expressing what someone else has said in one's own words. It is used when one wishes to provide a detailed account of what the other writer has said, but not to quote directly. The main challenge here, particularly if English is not one's first language, is to find one's own words. It is essential to summarise or re-write the whole passage; if one just changes some of the original words, one can be accused of plagiarism (see section 5.5). In order to be able to paraphrase a piece of text, one must really understand it. This is one of the reasons why (as indicated in section 3.5) it is useful to take notes when reading. As Clanchy and Ballard (1983: 44) point out, 'the process of note-taking forces you to [among other things] understand and interpret the original source'.
3. *Direct quotations*: Direct quotations are used when the author's words are particularly apt or effective, or when it would be difficult to 'translate' them into one's words. One of the arts of writing is to determine the appropriate number and length of quotations. As a general rule, quotations should be used sparingly and long quotations only used if they serve a very clear purpose. Another art is to

integrate quotations into the ‘flow’ of the text. As Hutchison (2007: 165) says, ‘every quote must be integrated into the grammar of the sentence or paragraph into which you wish to place it’. One should be able to read the sentence or paragraph in such a way that, unless one looks at the quote marks, one cannot tell which part is the writer’s own words and which part the quotation.

5.5 Acknowledgement of Sources

The final requirement is that the sources of data should be fully acknowledged, using a consistent and generally recognised referencing system. There are two main reasons for this. The first is to ensure that ‘credit is given where credit is due’; in other words, to make sure that one writer is not given credit for work that another writer has already done. The use of another person’s work without due acknowledgement is known as *plagiarism* and is regarded as a serious offence in the academic world. The second reason is to show readers where one has obtained the information or ideas discussed, so that they can, if they wish, go back to the original sources to learn more.

In the case of primary data, the main challenge is to determine how to acknowledge one’s own data, especially information derived from *ad hoc* observation or experience, rather than a formal piece of research. It is often advisable to give a brief explanation of the source of information, either in the text or in a footnote, rather than to try to provide it in the form of a conventional reference.

In the case of secondary data, there are two main challenges. The first is to ensure that all factual statements and assertions derived from secondary sources are acknowledged. In this respect, it is important to distinguish between *assertions* and *arguments* (Fairbairn and Winch 1996: 189-90). An assertion is a statement of opinion and must be justified either by citing the secondary sources from which it is derived or by clearly stating that it is one’s own personal opinion. An argument, on the other hand, is a line of reasoning, which is justified by the sequence of evidence that has been presented throughout the paper. The origins of the individual pieces of evidence have to be acknowledged, but the argument as a whole does not.

The second challenge is to use an acceptable system of referencing. A discussion of alternative referencing systems is beyond the scope of this *Guide*.¹⁹ Most institutions, publishing companies and journals have their own ‘in-house style’, which must be followed when writing for them. IDS is no exception and IDS researchers and students are advised to familiarise themselves with the IDS house style (IDS 2006) and to use it unless there is a good reason for doing otherwise. If no particular system is specified, one may use any generally recognised system, provided that one is consistent and uses the same system throughout the paper.

¹⁹ The classic text on referencing systems is Turabian (2007). However, most books on writing skills provide an adequate overview of key points.

6. Some Final Tips

Rather than attempting to summarise the many points made in this *Guide*, I will conclude by suggesting five simple tips for improving the quality of one's critical writing. They are particularly relevant to IDS Masters students. The five tips are:

1. *Read - and observe how others write:* One of the best ways to learn how to write well is to read other people's work and note their styles of writing. However, one should do this critically. Many academics do not write well, and one should imitate those that one finds easiest to read and understand.
2. *Plan your work:* It is essential to plan one's paper. If one starts writing without some sort of plan, there is little chance of producing a well-argued paper. However, the plan should not be seen as a blueprint that cannot be changed; it should be constantly reviewed and revised in the course of writing.
3. *Allow sufficient time to write – and re-write:* Individuals vary greatly in terms of the ease with which they are able to write, and thus the amount of time it takes them to write. However, even the most accomplished writers do not expect to produce a satisfactory piece of work overnight or to do so in the first draft. One should therefore allow sufficient time for writing and be prepared to revise what one has written at least once.
4. *Get help with editing:* Those who find writing particularly difficult are advised, especially if English is not their first language, to find someone to help edit their work – and to allow time for this.
5. *Practice:* There is an English proverb that says 'Practice makes perfect'. In the case of critical writing, few people are likely ever to become perfect. However, practice will undoubtedly improve one's performance significantly. All Masters students leave IDS with far better writing skills than they had when they arrived.

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Annex 1: Dunlap's Three Cultural Styles of Writing

Dunlap (1990: 65-68) cites three cultural styles of writing that differ significantly from the linear or hierarchical form commonly used in English. She calls these the 'Arabic zigzag', the 'Hispanic meander' and the 'Asian spiral' and represents them diagrammatically as follows (Dunlap 1990: 66):



She describes the main characteristics of each style as follows:

Arabic Zigzag

Dunlap describes this style as one in which the writer presents points in an apparently random order, leaving the reader to make the connections between them. She cites the following example:

My most recent experience was in a new town development in the desert./ The study is divided into three main phases. The first phase concerns the choice of location for this town after which a master plan is prepared and implementation follows./ The whole idea of new towns in Egypt is a very recent experience upon which many social and economic changes are expected./ Ninety-six per cent of the Egyptian population lives on four per cent of the area. (Dunlap 1990: 66-67; her slashes represent breaks between apparently unrelated points).

She goes on to comment that: 'I could see there *were* very powerful connections between the ideas in this apparently random collection and other themes and ideas in the paper; but none of them were expressed' (Dunlap 1990: 67).

Hispanic Meander

This is a style in which ideas are not expressed directly but (as the name and the diagram suggest) in a 'meandering' way. Dunlap maintains (1990: 67) that 'Hispanic language speakers arrange thoughts in a pattern that is leisurely and digressive rather than direct'. She goes on to explain that:

The straightforward order of ideas that is the mainstay of US critical writing sounds blunt and crude to Latin Americans. To announce an idea, then move directly and relentlessly to its proof is to leave aside the richness, nuance, digression, and erudition that they consider proof of sensibility and even

intelligence. However, to North Americans, Latin prose often sounds flowery and irrelevant. Within a Hispanic paragraph there may be as many as five or six digressions -discussing authors or theories or cities that may or may not be significant parts of the critical whole. (Dunlap 1990: 67)

She also maintains that ‘this tendency is most pronounced in writing for academic, as opposed to professional or practical, audiences; for academics, especially, an elegant display of learning seems to be the purpose’ (Dunlap 1990: 68).

Asian Spiral

Dunlap describes this style as a ‘repetitive, yet developing, spiral’ (Dunlap 1990: 68; citing Coe 1987). She maintains that:

This highly crafted pattern .. relies heavily on nuance, on suggested meanings and connections that a reader must infer. Typically, the spiral consists of the introduction of an idea, development of one or several aspects of it, reintroduction of the idea with some heightened sense of its significance, more discussion of aspects, and a summing up of the idea. Although alluded to several times, the idea is rarely stated directly. (Dunlap 1990: 68).

Annex 2: Examples of Concise Writing

Dunlap (1990: 71-72) gives two examples of concise writing. In both cases, she first cites the original version of the passage and then shows how it can be rewritten more concisely:

Example 1:

Original version:

‘Excessive concentration of political and economic power in the central government, namely Centralization, is an attribute typically associated with most Third World countries. Colombia is no exception to the rule.’

Concise version:

‘Political and economic centralization typifies Third World countries, for example, Colombia.’

Example 2:

Original version:

‘The "image of production" revolves around the notion of the "production unit". Conventionally, attention is focussed on the functioning of individual entities and defining their production process in isolation. The total production has been implicitly assumed to be the sum of the individual units put together. This notion and approach toward understanding home-based production seems to be too simplistic and could lead to incorrect assumptions.’

Concise version:

‘The conventional notion of a "production unit" functioning in isolation under one roof is too simple to explain home-based manufacturing in Delhi.’