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Осипова Е.И., Погребная И.Ф.
Академическое письмо на английском языке:
трудности и способы их преодоления

Osipova E.I., Pogrebnaya I.F.
Academic writing in English: challenges and
ways of overcoming them

В статье рассматриваются особенности академического письма на английском языке; трудности, с которыми сталкиваются студенты-лингвисты в процессе освоения курса по академическому письму в колледже, а также наиболее типичные ошибки, допускаемые в результате существующих различий в понимании и подходе к академическому письму носителей различных лингвокультур

Ключевые слова: академическое письмо, эссе, методы подготовки к письму, лексика, редактирование и корректура

The article focuses on the peculiarities of academic writing in English, difficulties, students linguists may come across while taking a course in college writing, most typical mistakes made with lingvocultural peculiarities not taken into account

Key words: academic writing, essay, prewriting methods, diction, editing and proofreading

Осипова Елена Игоревна

Студент

Южный федеральный университет

г. Ростов-на-Дону, ул. Большая Садовая, 33

Osipova Elena Igorevna

Student

South federal university

Rostov-on-Don, Bolshaya Sadovaya st., 33

Погребная Ирина Федоровна

Кандидат филологических наук, доцент

Южный федеральный университет

г. Ростов-на-Дону, ул. Большая Садовая, 33

Pogrebnaya Irina Fyodorovna

Candidate of Philological Sciences, Associate

Professor

South federal university

Rostov-on-Don, Bolshaya Sadovaya st., 33

When at college students of linguistic departments often have an inability of putting their ideas or thoughts in words or lack knowledge how to do it correctly. College students find a certain difficulty in writing such assignments as essays, term papers, synopses, reviews, research papers, theses, and have to complete many other academic and personal requirements. To find the best way to writing essays with all the avalanches of workload accompanying this type of work, it is necessary to follow the tips and guidelines of special training courses, you may take online to upgrade your skills in this field of study.

The "College writing" course offered by Coursera.com – Free Online Courses From Top Universities introduces students to academic writing and shows them how

to research an academic essay, cite references and put a paper together. It provides students having little experience of academic writing with guidance and practice in the basics of writing in an academic context, that is with the fundamental tools and methodology to write essays, which helps students master the academic writing skills needed to succeed in their academic careers.

Academic writing is one of the most important components of academic literacy. Nowadays almost every student or even a scientist who makes researches and wants to publish its results in international journals, faces the problem of discrepancy between writing standards typical of Russia and academic writing principles in the world scientific community. "Each linguistic community has its own cultural and determined inventions for and approaches to writing", – reported Natalie Reid, editor and trainer in academic writing to members of Russian International Affairs Council. A number of universities in the USA and Europe offer special courses for training and development of academic writing skills. Being among participants in a "College writing" course of study offered by BerkeleyX, an online learning initiative of the University of California, Berkeley through edX, we came to understand the notion of academic writing, its general principles, common mistakes and develop the skills of academic writing by means of accomplishing various assignments; and finally we summarized the difficulties Russian students may face while learning this "English phenomenon".

Some students do not completely understand the term "academic writing", and what in fact it is, because of the absence of such phenomenon in Russian language culture, and as a result they try to adjust it to traditional styles of writing, with the scientific one among them. It leads to misunderstanding and perversion of the academic writing and its principles.

"The first problem that almost all students meet on their way is non-acquaintance with components of academic writing" [1]. The target of this course is writing an essay that has to meet all requirements and standards of academic writing. There is no precise and entire conception of this genre in modern stylistics [2], that deludes students, especially those who have never faced this type of work. Some dictionaries and reference-books interpret this notion as a sketch, based on certain thoughts of a person and shaped in a free style, while other sources characterize this genre as a short literary debate around a particular issue in a strict consequence. In spite of such variety of definitions, which sometimes are rather contradictory, we have to separate out an academic essay as a genre of academic writing, which has its specific style and structure. The academic essay is a reflection of how well the student understands the subject he is writing about, how much extra work he has put into researching the essay topic and how analytical and thorough the student has been in selecting and commenting on the used material. Here students have to draw a line between an essay and a traditional Russian report. The main feature of an essay is argumentation and contribution of a student to the discussion of the problem, while a report is mainly based on facts and information [3, p.77].

The first stage of academic essay writing is choosing a proper topic. The student should not only be enthusiastic but also aware of it. Once the student has identified his interest area, he is to start narrowing it down to one clear problem, go deep

into the subject and present new and original opinion and ideas [4]. It is a common mistake with students, when they try to encompass the whole sphere of interests in order to have more material to write about and to show their knowledge. Such approach results in writing a large superficial research full of worn-out and iterant ideas and facts.

It is difficult to start an essay without pre-writing. So the following step is to analyze the topic, to develop it and to define the aspects that should be covered in the future essay. There are many brainstorming techniques and pre-writing methods to make this process easier and at the same time more efficient. Sometimes student are not aware of them or just sceptical of using them in writing trying to stick to more traditional methods.

This course acquaints students with such brainstorming techniques as “cubing”, the “matrix” approach and “20 questions”.

“Cubing” does a lot of good for those students who have a general idea of their topic. “Cubing” means looking at a topic from six different perspectives, like the six sides of a cube. These sides represent the different aspects of the writing. So the student is to describe the topic (what is it?), compare it (how is it similar to or different from other related topics?), associate it (what does it make you think of?), analyze it (what constituent parts is it made of? how do they fit together?), apply it (how is it used? who uses it?), and argue for and/or against it (how can you support or oppose it?) [5]. Doing this task a student has to write quickly, spending from three to five minutes on each side of the cube. When you have finished, read everything and choose that statement that seem the most important or interesting or that you would like to develop further.

Another effective brainstorming technique is the “matrix” approach. It is useful to organize and structure the thoughts. A matrix presents a table of information. It looks like this: main points of the topic are disposed along one side of this table and some questions or points relevant to this topic are disposed across the top. So the student is to fill each cell with appropriate ideas and examples. The writer can also use this table for a multi-point comparison.

The method of “20 questions” lies in interviewing the topic. In other words the student has to imagine that the topic is a person, pretend to be that person and answer 20 questions [5]. Such questions may serve as some kind of plan or just help to widen and deepen the earlier selected material and discover some new theses.

Using such pre-writing methods as cubing, matrix and many others you can gather ideas, think about organization and experiment with different ways of approaching the goal of your writing. The brainstorming techniques help to reveal interesting and original ideas and to look at the problem from the other side. Pre-writing methods are used in addition to customary plan and thesis.

The most common mistake is wordiness that takes place when a writer uses more words than he needs in order to write what he means. It happens when students try to sound more formal and academic or to make their ideas sound important. For example, writers rely on some standard phrases which make their writing very heavy, such as based on the fact that, despite the fact that, have the ability to, instead of using concise words. Sometimes wordiness arises when the writer is not

exactly sure of what he wants to say in a sentence. Wordiness is a problem of writers who have restricted vocabulary or do not know the basic terminology of the topic. Thus, writers cannot use more precise words and express their thoughts compactly and exactly. Some students tend to use too many unnecessary and vague modifiers, synonyms do not add any meaning to the writing and parenthesis or personal commentary, such as I believe, I think, I just want to emphasize etc.

The writer has to use the vocabulary correctly in the right contexts. Choosing the right vocabulary is also known as choosing your diction. According to the Oxford Dictionary of English, diction is the choice and use of words and phrases in speech or writing. The chosen words can be formal, informal, or colloquial/slang [5]. For example, my father (formal), my dad (informal), my old man (colloquial/slang). Using slang in academic writing is a mistake. Words can have almost the same denotation (dictionary meaning) but differ in connotations (implied meanings). People who study English as a foreign language face the problem with understanding connotations. According to the definition of Marriam-Webster Dictionary, a connotation is an idea or quality that a word makes you think about in addition to its meaning. These additional meanings are often cultural or emotional in nature, so those who are not English native speakers can hardly feel and understand such aspect of notion without consulting a dictionary.

The next mistake that often reveals Russian writers is a difficult sentence structure. Students try to transfer Russian traditional syntax into academic writing, making their sentences long and complicated. "The writer must keep sentences and paragraphs much shorter than in Russian academic writing. He needs to make two or even three shorter but carefully and tightly connected sentences instead of making the sentences unnecessary long. The writers' goal is not only to show their rich vocabulary or wide knowledge but also how well they have digested and synthesized the material and without sacrifice in meaning how concisely they can deliver that information", – Natalie Reid, editor and trainer in academic writing, USA. The most difficult thing in writing is to express your own thoughts clear enough for the reader to understand it [6, p.35].

Another feature of Russian writers is the excessive use of passive voice, which is an indispensable prerequisite of the academic style. In English the passive voice makes sentences difficult to understand. On the contrary, active sentences are clearer and more direct. Passive voice also eliminates personal pronouns. Writers use Passive voice to make sentences sound more impersonal, objective and in cases when the emphasis is on the action, receiver, or result, the writer does not know who performed the action. But it makes not more than 20% of passive constructions [4]. In English academic writing personal pronouns are treated as a means of connection between the writer and the reader, while in Russian academic style writers avoid using personal pronouns, to make their speech more generalized abstract.

Students who do not have rich vocabulary or want to emphasize a certain idea face the problem of word repetition. A good way out in this case is to use synonyms. Another effective technique is to use word substitutes like one, the former, the latter, etc. to avoid repetition of the same nouns.

After you have finished writing your draft, you are to do three important things: revision, editing and proofreading.

Revision includes reorganization of ideas and paragraphs, providing them with additional examples or information. All the concepts have to be clear, complete and logically organized from an interesting title to the conclusion, which is to leave the reader something to think of.

The final step is editing and proofreading, which present check in your spelling, punctuation, grammar, especially subject-predicate agreement, verb tenses etc. and identifying any types of formatting errors.

Of course you can start working on your writing skills much earlier than at college. Students come across the difficulty of writing essays even at school when they face the challenge of taking a Russian State Exam in English, one of the parts of which is Writing. To get acquainted with writing principles, they are offered a series of books by Macmillan Publishers, with "Macmillan Exam Skills for Russia: Reading and Writing" among them. All possible writing know-how, such as: hints and rules, and tools, brainstorming methods for composition development, the layout and text structure, warm-up exercises, useful phrase reference and word-perfect sections and other writing-skill developers are intended for potential "writers" here. Students are told how to paragraph wisely, select an appropriate style, start and end their articles, develop narrative by going from prompts to sentences, summarize views. And of course grammar and punctuation are in focus [7]. All these may be a good start before College writing courses delivered by well-known academicians you may take online.

"College writing" courses help to develop academic writing skills, to teach writers to express their thoughts clearly and logically, according to international academic writing standards. Academic writing courses are not widely adopted in Russia, so some students resort to international ones. But they are universal hence they leave out linguistic peculiarities of their participants, that can lead to some difficulties and above-mentioned mistakes, especially with those studying English as a foreign language.

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