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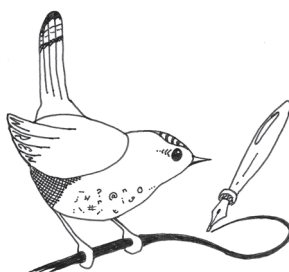
Advanced English writing skills
for Dutch speakers

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Introduction

Have you ever sat in front of a computer screen, for what seems an age, trying to formulate that first sentence of an essay? Have you had doubts about the tone of your email to a teacher, or had difficulty using your notes because key information is missing? These frustrating situations underline the fact that writing, in its many forms, is challenging. Moreover, the size of the challenge only seems to increase when we are faced with writing in a language that is not our mother-tongue. There might be uncertainties about spelling and punctuation, worries over the accuracy of grammar, and frustration at not achieving the kind of `flow´ we see in native-speaker texts.

These difficulties, and many others besides, are obstacles to achieving the prime objective of writing, *effective communication*. Ideally, we want to produce texts that will convey ideas and information to our intended readers in a clear, efficient and appropriate manner; but it often requires strenuous effort to progress along the path towards that ideal.

The good news is that the difficulties outlined above are by no means insurmountable. Yes, writing is a challenge, but it is also a skill that with guidance and practice can be acquired, developed and refined. *Writing in English* (or *Wren* for short) has been written with that process in mind. Guidance comes in the form of detailed instruction on a range of techniques that are central to developing sound writing skills, and on specific genres with their attendant conventions. Practice is provided via a full volume of exercises designed to support your growth as a writer of English-language texts.

The book is primarily aimed at third-level students (university-college or university) whose mother-tongue is Dutch and who wish to develop their English writing skills across a range of genres at an advanced level; but it is also suitable for final-year secondary-school pupils for whom English will be

Chapter 1

Note-Taking

He listens well who takes notes. - Dante Alighieri

____ Introduction

Note-taking is a skill that is seldom taught formally in schools or colleges, yet it is a key writing skill. In higher education notes taken during lectures often form an important part of the materials to be studied for examinations. Similarly, notes taken from written sources can be of vital importance when preparing to write an essay, report or dissertation. Moreover, note-taking is an important skill in the workplace where the accurate transfer of information from, say a meeting, presentation or report, makes an important contribution to effective communication.

At a basic level note-taking might be seen as simply a means to record relevant information from a spoken or written text in a condensed form, and it is often regarded as simply a preparatory stage on the road to producing a finished text such as an article, report or essay. The activity is often conducted in an ad-hoc fashion in which the notes are written rapidly in a linear structure as the student struggles to record as much information as possible. Text (a) below shows an excerpt from notes taken on a talk about Skype technology. The writer has attempted to write in full sentences, there is little in the way of abbreviation and the question marks indicate missing content that the writer did not pick up. In addition it is not clear how the different pieces of information relate to each other, for example which points are the main points?

Function	Phrases
Example	*for example, for instance, an illustration of this is*
Time	*before, after, previous, subsequent, meanwhile*
Addition	*also, in addition, furthermore, moreover*
Cause and effect	*as a result, so, therefore, thus,*
Contrast	*however, in contrast to, on the one/other hand, unlike…,*
Enumeration	*first(ly), second(ly) …, finally, the following points/ steps, next*
Emphasis	*the most important, more importantly, above all, it must be stressed, make sure you get this down/note this down*
Reformulation	*in other words, put another way, that is*
Contrast	*but, yet, however, nevertheless, still*
Concession	*indeed, though, granted, admittedly*
Summary	*to sum up, in a nutshell, in conclusion*
State secondary importance	*as an aside, don´t note this down*

1.2 How to note it down – note-taking formats

The use of a format for taking notes can help you to become an efficient note-taker because with practice you will be able to write down information within a given structure that will aid your comprehension and retention of the content. An obvious place to begin is by dividing the blank page into sections. A simple example of this is the **double-margin** format (a) in which the main notes are taken in the broad central section of the page, while the margins can be used for adding comments, references, additional information, etc., after the talk or lecture. The simplicity of the design allows for flexibility, which makes this format useful for situations in which the material lacks a clear structure, for example taking notes from a discussion.

2.2 Purposes of paraphrasing

There are a number of purposes for which paraphrasing is used and that make the activity useful and often necessary in a wide range of writing contexts.

Generalising detail

Strictly speaking paraphrasing takes place at the same level as the source text, in that the level of detail in the paraphrase should be similar to that of the source text. However, we often need to condense information from the original into shorter descriptions, which requires concision and moves us into the activity of summarising. Both summarising and paraphrasing share the feature of being reformulations of the original. Compare the two texts below. Text A is a paraphrase, while text B summarises the detail.

Original text (www.theguardian.com)

> Before postal votes were counted, they were neck and neck, with Van der Bellen on 48.1% of direct votes and Hofer on 51.9%. Many Austrian websites were down under the weight of traffic as the country waited with bated breath for news of the final result. In the final result, however, Van der Bellen pipped Hofer. But they were separated by just 31,000 votes out of more than 4.6m ballots cast.

Text A (paraphrased)

> Prior to the inclusion of the postal votes, the two candidates were about level, with Van der Bellen at 48.1% and Hofer at 51.9%. At that point numerous websites in Austria could not be accessed because of the sheer number of users waiting for the final result of the election. In the end, Hofer beat Van der Bellen, but of the 4.6m votes cast, there was a difference of only 31,000 votes between the two candidates.

Text B (summarised)

> In the Austrian election Van der Bellen beat Hofer by an extremely narrow margin.

In this particular example the summary is rather minimal, focusing on the essential information, that candidate A has beaten candidate B. The assumption here is

Chapter 3

Cohesion and coherence

Language is a form of human reason, which has its internal logic of which man knows nothing. – Claude Lévi-Strauss

Introduction

A well-written text is like an intricate piece of machinery: its cogs, springs and levers carefully arranged to ensure the machine works smoothly. Likewise, in a text, words, phrases, sentences and paragraphs are linked together or related in order to produce a coherent flow of information. This is what we mean by COHESION: the close relationships that exist between parts of a text, either on the basis of the meaning of words or on the basis of grammatical relationships.

For example

> *Politicians do not seem to agree on the most important changes that should be implemented in British society. They differ in the focus they give to a number of issues. The Conservatives back economic reforms, while Labour backbenchers favour an increase of social welfare expenditure.*

These sentences are connected in a number of ways and as such enable the reader to make sense of the ideas :

the nouns *politicians – Conservatives – Labour backbenchers* are related in meaning: *politicians* can be considered an umbrella term or hyperonym, because *Conservatives* and *Labour backbenchers* are kinds of politicians

the verbs *back* and *favour*, the verb phrases *do not agree* and *differ* and the nouns *changes* and *reforms* are synonymous in meaning

the conjunction *while* makes the contrast in meaning between the two clauses grammatically explicit

the personal pronoun *they* refers to the noun *politicians*

This chapter will practise this structural skill of writing in a number of steps.

DISCOURSE FUNCTION	conjunctive adverbs and adverbial phrases	coordinating conjunctions	subordinating conjunctions	prepositions adjectives determiners … + N	verbs and verb phrases
to introduce a purpose	for that purpose to that end		in order that in order to so so as to so that to		
to list in order	first (E) firstley second, third … for one thing finally (M) next last lastly			the first, second, third, etc. the next, last, final	
to introduce a temporal reference or chronological order	after a while after that afterwards (M,E) as yet (E) at first (M,E) at present (M,E) at the moment at the same time before that/then by then/that time (M,E) currently earlier (E) eventually (M,E) first (M) from then on (E) initially (M, E) instantly (M,E) in the end (M, E) in the meantime (M,E) meanwhile next previously (M,E) shortly (E) simultaneously since then (M,E) still (M) so far (M,E) soon (M,E) subsequently (M,E) then until then (M,E)		after after which as as long as as soon as before by the time hardly no sooner once since until when whenever whereupon while	after before during until	

(3)

> **3 what makes somebody tick** *informal* the thoughts, feelings, opinions etc that give someone their character or make them behave in a particular way:
> ◄) *I've never really understood what makes her tick.*
>
> **4 tick all the right boxes** *informal* if something ticks all the right boxes, it does everything that you wanted it to do or is everything you wanted it to be

(4)

> **sod²** ◄) ◄) *verb British English spoken not polite*
>
> **1 sod it/that** used to rudely express anger or annoyance at something or someone:
> *Sod it, I've missed the train.*
>
> **2** [transitive only in imperative or infinitive] used to say rudely that something is not important:
> *Sod the job, I'm going home.*
>
> **3 sod off** an offensive way of telling someone to go away

Compare the following conversation snippets. In the three examples a speaker invites an addressee to have dinner at an Indian restaurant. The change in the way the message is expressed depends on how close speaker and addressee are, moving from very close in (1) to not close in (3):

1. <u>A little bird told me</u> that the <u>grub</u> at this new Indian <u>place</u> is <u>pukka</u>! <u>Fancy doing</u> <u>a ruby</u> there sometime?
2. I've heard that the <u>food</u> at this new Indian <u>place</u> is really <u>brilliant</u>. <u>How about</u> a <u>curry</u> there sometime?
3. I've heard that the new Indian <u>restaurant</u> has an <u>excellent</u> <u>menu</u>. <u>Would you</u> be interested in joining me for <u>dinner</u> there?

The sentences in 1. and 2. are informal and would only be used among people who are on close terms. In such cases, formal politeness rules are usually dropped (e.g. the modal *would you* is not used in the invitation) and the bonding between the interlocutors often relies on humour (e.g. the informal idiom *A little bird told me*) and casual references (e.g. *this new place, fancy doing, how about, sometime*). The invitation in 3. expresses a much more formal relationship, observing conventions of politeness.

Example 1. uses language that would still be considered more colloquial than 2. In other words, the speaker and addressee in 1. will know each other better

M2	On the whole, the study does not confirm that mobile radiation is linked to the incidence of brain cancer.	The study, which will be published this week in the *International Journal of Epidemiology,* found that, overall, there was no clear connection between cell-phone use and brain cancer. Dr. Christopher Wild, who helped coordinate the study said, "An increased risk of brain cancer is not established from the data from Interphone."
S1	This finding has been taken up by the mobile industry to support their claim that the use of mobiles is safe.	The mobile-phone industry was quick to promote Interphone's most basic results. Jack Rowley, who represents hundreds of mobile phone makers and operators, said in a statement, `The overall finding is in accordance with the large body of existing research and many expert reviews that consistently conclude there is no established health risk from radio signals that comply with international safety recommendations."
M3	However, there are aspects of the study that do suggest phones can be harmful to those who use the appliances frequently,	But upon closer inspection the results were checkered: the 10% of people who used their phones most often and for the longest period of time — 30 minutes a day or more on average for at least 10 years — had a substantially higher risk of developing some forms of brain cancer than those who didn't use a mobile at all. Meanwhile, people who used their cell phones infrequently had a lower risk of developing some brain tumors than those who exclusively used corded telephones — as if mobile phones in small doses might offer some protection from brain cancer.
S2	which gives some support to the opinion of consumer interest groups that mobile use can damage one´s health.	But consumer advocates, who have in the past raised concerns about the safety of mobile phones, argue that the study did find cancer risks for heavy users.

Summarising plot and character

A review will typically involve some degree of summarising plot elements and characters. The aim should be to cover sufficient detail to give the reader a sense of the film's parts, but not to overload the review, which can lead to a text that is more a description than an analysis. Below are two examples in which the bare essentials of a film's plot are presented economically.

Having been forced to isolate herself because of her icily magical powers, Princess Elsa shuns her sister Anna's attentions for fear that she may harm her. But when an outbreak of eternal winter sends Elsa into exile, Anna is in hot pursuit, aided by (among others) talking snowman Olaf […] (www.theguardian.com)

Detailing the story of how Solomon Northup (Chiwetel Ejiofor), a free black man with a wife and two children is tricked and then sold into slavery, the key thing that keeps the film working is your awareness that this is a true story. (www.thelondonfilmreview.com)

When looking to summarise (a part of) a film as part of a review, you should ask yourself, ' What is the bare minimum of detail that the reader requires?' Plot description is a way of setting the scene so that your comments on the film have a context; remember, a review is about your opinion of the film rather than a neutral description of the film. You should also take care not to include spoilers in your description, important events or a climax in a plot that if known beforehand will reduce the viewing pleasure of the audience.

The description of characters is another area in which it is easy to write far more than is necessary. A good writer is able to indicate character using relatively few words; take for example the following:

Opening in Athens, the film gives us Chester (Mortensen) and Colette (Kirsten Dunst), **a stylish, wealthy** *married couple who encounter* **a young American tour guide and petty conman**, *Rydal (Oscar Isaac), just as Chester's hidden money troubles start to haunt him. (www.timeout.com)*

Seth Rogen and Rose Byrne star in this comedy from the director of 'Forgetting Sarah Marshall' as a **happy, thirty-something** *couple with a kid.(www.timeout. com)*