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Review of Online Resources for Academic Writing in English

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for Academic Writing in English

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Introduction

The spreading of English as the *lingua franca* of the academic and the business worlds has led to a growing hunger among non-native English speakers for qualifications from universities in English speaking countries. This has in turn seen an escalation in the number of courses where Academic Writing in English is taught as a specific discipline. A massive number of resources and references for teaching and studying all facets of English writing are now available on the Internet. However, since the addresses and content of sites are constantly changing, and as new sites are being developed every day, many teachers are unaware of where to find the resources they need. Even if teachers find a particular site that looks helpful, they may waste hours either trying to evaluate the site or trying to figure out how to use the resources in a practical sense.

A general search using the key words "academic writing" produces a hotchpotch of URL's, some that may be useful as an on-line writing resources and others that have only a peripheral relationship with the subject. For example, a number of sites provide editing and proofreading services for Masters and PhD. students. There are some 'writing centers' listed that give suggested outlines for resumes and business letters. But by far the most comprehensive academic writing sites, and the ones that would prove most useful to undergraduate ESL writing teachers, are those sites established by a number of universities in English speaking countries. Most of these sites are listed as OWLs (On-line Writing Laboratories), which are sites set up as study aids for both teachers and students. These sites evolved out of the need for specialist writing assistance for the growing number of non-native English speaking students who were being

enrolled in mainstream university courses. Several sites specialize in a particular area or discipline. But many have similar information and are set up using a similar framework.

This paper will attempt to outline some of the more useful Academic Writing sites that are available on the Internet for teachers. Firstly, as a foundation guide to on-line academic writing resources, a model of a typical OWL site will be described. As well as presenting the model and its contents, specific OWL sites will be recommended and some of their possible uses discussed. Following this description of OWL sites, other sites such as dictionaries, on-line journals and interactive learning sites will also be included. Those sites that are especially well equipped to deal with certain fields will also be pointed out. It is hoped that the URLs printed in the body of this paper will provide a wide and varied range of sites with easy access.

This report should only be considered a guide into the possible uses of some Internet writing resources. The main intention of the paper is purely to provide teachers with some easily accessible material that could be used to enhance the quality and efficiency of their writing classes as well as easing some of the burden of preparation. The resources included are those that, through research and practical use by the author and through recommendations by colleagues, are considered to be the most useful sites for teachers of writing in English.

A typical OWL model

The best way to construct a model of any of the larger more comprehensive OWL's or writing center sites is by breaking down the constituent parts or contents that are common to most sites and categorize them into three separate sections:

· General Essay Writing

· Grammar

· Professional and Academic Writing

General Essay Writing

Any explanation on a writing site about how to write an essay at university is usually broken up into a number of sub-headings: Planning and Structure; Effectiveness; Writing Devices; Revising and Proofreading.

Planning and Structure covers the essay design and format; introductions and conclusion, the structure of paragraphs, how to develop an argument, etc. These are the kinds of subjects that

are dealt with in this section.

Effectiveness deals with ways in which the writer can write a clear and easily readable essay by explaining techniques that can help with conciseness, coherence, and emphasis.

Writing devices explains how a writer can make his or her point more interestingly or in the most appropriate way. Literary devices such as metaphors and sentence variety as well as the concept of non-sexist language are some of the topics that may be covered in this section.

Revising and Proofreading examines the refining of the document; how to edit an essay, punctuation standards and proofreading strategies might be included here. Many of the OWLs focus on peer-editing techniques and how they can be used in the classroom to develop student awareness of common writing errors. Other aspects of essay writing that relate to genre or the type of style of essay (Compare/contrast, cause & effect, etc.) also appear in a number of OWL's. Topics relating to literature, exam essays, gender, writing definitions and debating arguments may also appear in this section.

Grammar

Nearly every kind of academic writing resource has a grammar section, some being more comprehensive than others are. Even though this section may be thought to be of most help to non-native speakers of English, it is also a useful reference for many native speakers who, unlike students a generation ago, are not taught grammatical rules intensively at high school. Some of the main areas covered in the grammar section include:

· Verb usage

· Articles

· Prepositions

· Modals

· Punctuation

· Sentence construction. Eg. Relative clauses, active and passive voice, compound sentences etc.

The amount of grammar references available at a variety of on-line sites goes well beyond what is mentioned here. Only a small search of OWL links should provide the answers to nearly all of the grammatical questions you might wish to ask.

Professional and Academic Writing

This section includes examples of, and guidelines for constructing, different types of special

purpose documents such as resumes, personal statements and business letters. On the Academic side, this section may also contain guides on how to write in a particular discipline. Eg. An Engineering report, Writing conventions in the sciences, or how to write out a patient chart in the school of nursing. Although this section of the OWL might be outside the scope of a general EFL university writing course, it is often where guides to academic writing standards can be found. For example, standards for citing references, making direct quotes, creating bibliographies or anything else associated with documenting sources in an academic essay may also be included in this section.

The nature of other on-line writing resources

Other resources

Dictionaries. There is a huge range of dictionaries available on-line. These range from regular English word dictionaries to thesauruses, grammar dictionaries, special term dictionaries (Medical dictionaries, Dictionaries of scientific terms, etc.) and foreign language dictionaries. Some dictionaries are included as part of the OWL site but usually the better dictionaries site links are provided by the OWL site.

On-line tutorials. As most of the sites are created and up-graded as part of the student services at a University, some OWL sites also advertise the chance to arrange a private academic writing tutorial over the Internet. This gives the user the chance to ask specific questions and get expert help in solving their academic writing problems. As a rule though, many of these on-line tutorials are only available to students of that university.

ESL (English as a Second Language) Activities. While these sites and links from OWL's are not actual academic writing resources, they are very useful appendices and are often a great study aid for non-native English speakers as well as a an excellent source of class material for teachers of ESL students.

Non-Owl Sites

OWL's are a starting point, a foundation. Yet beyond these sites, there are many more sites with masses of information and assistance for teacher's of academic writing. This review attempts to group various homepages and on-line services into three categories:

1) Grammar and format reference sites - sites where students and teachers can go to confirm writing rules and conventions.

2) Teaching material and resource sites - homepages where worksheets, lesson plans and in-c-

lass material can be downloaded for use by the teacher.

3) Interactive learning sites - sites teachers can refer their students to that allow them to do practice grammar tests, submit sample writing assignments, or communicate in writing with other students from all over the world, while they are on-line.

Some statements and recommendations are made about the site and resources based on its degree of utility for a university teacher of undergraduate English writing classes. For example, resource A may be useful for providing easy to understand grammar explanations and practice examples that a teacher can pass on to students. However, resource B may be useful as an interactive teaching resource that can be used during a lesson to compare essay writing proficiency or evaluate student performance in that discipline.

The review of OWLs

In an investigation of nearly 100 OWL sites, a few stand out as the best place to start any search for information on academic writing. *The Purdue University On-line Writing Laboratory* (http://owl.english.purdue.edu/) site has an extensive range of information that is easily accessible and well signposted. Still, more than this fact, the main reason for starting a search here is the number of links that the Purdue site has to other academic writing sites - links to more than ninety other University OWL's and writing centres alone

(http://owl.english.purdue.edu/internet/owls/writing-labs.html). A host of other on-line writing resources can also be accessed directly from the Purdue site. But perhaps the best thing about the Purdue OWL is that it provides a vast array of teaching handouts that can be downloaded straight from the site. These range from practice activities to interactive tests that can be copied or used by the teacher. Alternatively, teachers can direct students straight to a site where they can do self-study or their own interactive learning.

Another other good place to start an on-line academic writing search is *The International Writing Centre's Association Page* (http://iwca.syr.edu/) which is maintained by the University of Syracuse. Like the Purdue site, it has a great range of resources and on-line writing links. It also has links to electronic writing journals and lists of printed journals. The site is thus, perhaps, more a place to start for researching academic writing rather than a place to look for assistance in lesson planning. There is a mountain of information, for example, about peer tutoring in writing, about teacher training, and links to professional writing organizations. There are lists of articles about new developments in teaching writing on-line and the resources available for writ-

ing teachers on-line. (http://iwca.syr.edu/IWCA/WCResources.html)

The University of Illinios at Urbana-Champaign's on-line writing resource page has an extensive list for links to pages that explain various referencing and citing techniques. http://www.siu.edu/ ~write/anchor1368972

Another excellent site for undergraduates looking for help in essay writing is the *University of Toronto Writing Center* (http://www.utoronto.ca/writing/advise.html). It has a comprehensive section on how to approach specific types of writing (Article critiques, Literature reviews, Lab reports, essay exams, etc.).

Capital Community College's Guide to Grammar and Writing
(http://webster.commnet.edu/grammar/) is a great one-stop shop for student's basic undergraduate and high school essay writing needs. It has an extensive grammar guide as well as composition format instructions, its own grammar search engine, a grammar question & answer section and links to other resources.

The Writing Centre at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute
(http://www.rpi.edu/dept/llc/writecenter/web/index.html) is a very helpful OWL for the first-time writing teacher. It offers suggestions for writing a syllabus and guidelines for constructing a writing course. http://www.rpi.edu/web/fscc/guidelines.html

The Colorado State University Writing Center http://writing.colostate.edu/ is probably most helpful as a guide for teachers. It offers suggestions for evaluating and designing writing assignments as well as more specific suggestions for helping writing students find significance, narrow their topic and summarize their main points.

The Kansas University's "Writer's Roost" http://www.writing.ku.edu/main.html is a great web site for giving hints on doing writing research on-line. It gives explanations for teachers and students on how to evaluate web sites, how to cite on-line resources and all things necessary for doing research on the web.

The Writing Center at University of North Carolina

http://www.unc.edu/depts/wcweb/handouts/argument.html has some excellent handouts for teachers of critical thinking classes that discuss how to write argumentative essays. Handouts on writing structure and style, logical fallacies and developing thesis statements may be particularly useful.

Other good OWL sites with a number of links to a large variety of academic writing resources are:

The University of Texas at Austin on-line Writing Laboratory
http://uwc.fac.utexas.edu/pages/students/handouts.html
The MIT on-line Writing Center http://web.mit.edu/writing/

Review of Non-OWL sites

While OWLs are useful resources for writing students, not all have been created specifically for the ESL or EFL learners. Also many OWL sites address only issues and problems that relate to the courses at that particular university. This means few of the OWLs offer complete advice guides to EFL academic writing. However, more on-line writing resources are available and being developed for non-native English writers. These sites can be grouped into three categories: Grammar and format reference sites; Teaching material and resource sites; and interactive learning sites.

1) Grammar and format reference sites -
These are perhaps the largest in number of the non-OWL academic writing sites. Although many OWLs offer good grammar explanations, different sites may be better at explaining some things than others.

Rensselar Writing Center http://www.rpi.edu/dept/llc/writecenter/web/esl.html has an explanation of how to use articles, explaining using the concept of countability and definiteness.

On-lines English Grammar http://www.edufind.com/english/grammar/subidx.cfm has the answers to more than 120 different grammar questions at your fingertips.

Paul Brian (lecturer in English at the University of Washington) has a very useful page on his own website called *Common list of writing errors* http://www.wsu.edu/~brians/errors/errors.html

This is a great place to go to find good answers to questions from students about the difference between colons and semicolons, accept and except, counsel & council, and among and between. The site also has a page of commonly misspelled words as well as a links page to other writing resource sites.

2) Teaching material and resource sites

Apart from the OWLs, which have a massive array of information regarding lesson plans for writing classes as well as downloadable teaching materials, there are a number of other private sites that offer help to students and teachers of academic writing.

ESL planet (http://www.eslplanet.com/teachertools/argueweb/frntpage.htm) has a fantastic formatted guide on how to construct an argumentative essay. While some of the OWL sites are directed at freshman undergraduate native English speaking students, this is page from a web-site designed specifically for ESL students. It is extensive and has clear explanations of a range of concepts that the student needs to understand in order to write a critical essay: debatable and non-debatable statements; providing supporting statements; relevancy; showing awareness of both sides of an issue, etc. All these explanations have related examples and practice questions that make it easy for the student to follow.

The Digital Education Network - actDEN (http://www2.actden.com/writ_den/index.htm) has a teacher's guide with a host of writing activities for teaching essay sentence format, creative writing, and academic writing supplements for individual education programs.

3) Interactive learning sites

These are sites where students either receive programmed responses to sample tests and exercises (the majority) or sites where students can directly communicate with other students or teachers (the minority). These kinds of sites are still not so numerous but are becoming more prevalent with the development of interactive educational software. Some examples of sites where students can do English grammar and vocabulary exercises are:

Common mistakes interactive test at Ruth's ESL Homepage.

http://www.ruthvilmi.net/hut/help/grammar_help/mistakes.html ;

A section of Vance Stephen's homepage that has links to several interactive TOEFL prepara-

tion sites. http://www.geocities.com/Athens/Olympus/4631/toeflpre.htm ;

Interactive preposition test.
 http://www.ruthvilmi.net/hut/help/grammar_help/beatrix_test.html ;

These kinds of sites are still quite simple and do not relate directly to more concrete aspects of writing such as paragraph construction. Sites that offer direct interaction are much more useful to the writing student as they offer individual feedback, peer correction and greater levels of stimulation. One such example is the web-based questionnaires page designed by Tim Stoeckel of Kansai Gaidai University.
 www.studentresearchpage.org
This web page allows students to create their own written surveys that are then posted on the net where they can be answered by other students or teachers. The writers then have the capability to analyse the results and write reports about what they have found. This kind of interactive writing exercise is proving to be stimulating to the students by providing an actual immediate practical use for their written work.

Other writing resource sites for teachers
Professional writing

Interactive learning sites are not necessarily just for students. They can also be excellent for professional development. For example, PowerPoint presentations are becoming more common as a lecture-style-teaching medium. The Purdue University has a selection of on-line workshops that are of great assistance to any academic writing teacher who is looking to becoming more familiar with this mode of instruction. *Building Writing Skills*
(http://owl.english.purdue.edu/workshops/pp/index.html) is a selection of interactive Power-Point presentations on a variety of writing-related topics designed specifically for teachers. Each presentation is designed to provide instructors with information about the elements of writing while allowing them to initiate student participation and discussion.
The Writing Centre at Colorado State University (http://writing.colostate.edu/)
concentrates more on process and presentation than content. It includes sections on different types of documents, writing for the web, desktop publishing, speeches and presentations. The same university's internet writing journal also has articles on current issues in academic writ-

ing. http://wac.colostate.edu/aw/contents/contents_v3_ie.htm

Post-graduate writing

The English Server at the University of Washington (http://eserver.org/about/) is an advanced writing and reading site run by writers, academics and scholars in a bid to offer and alternative arena for publishing. It offers 42 collections on such diverse topics as contemporary art, race, 18th century literary criticism, Internet studies, sexuality, drama, design, gender studies and current political and social issues. In addition to written works, it publishes hypertext, audio and even video recordings. It can be used as a research resource or as an educational tool for learning publishing or how to edit a website.

English for Scientific Research

(http://iceusc.usc.es/ccuniversitaria/recursos/ESRe-home.htm) is actually an ESL site and is aimed at scientific researchers whose mother tongue is not English. It was written for those who want to improve their English-language scientific writing skills. However, the site centres on the skills required for writing a research article so is potentially useful to native language speakers as well.

Dictionaries

Many OWLs have a list of links to English language dictionaries, thesauruses and quotation dictionaries, bilingual and foreign language dictionaries and discipline specific and technical language dictionaries. One of the biggest multi-purpose dictionaries available on line is *Dictionary.com* (http://www.dictionary.com/). It offers foreign language dictionaries, translation services, writing resources, links to on-line bookshops and, of course, an English vocabulary search facility. Another dictionary offering a massive range of links to foreign language dictionaries (more than 200) and specialist dictionaries (more than 50) is *yourdictionary* (http://www.yourdictionary.com/). This dictionary has all kinds of other links to translating services, spelling anomalies, pronunciation, new vocabulary and endangered languages. Examples of some of the other good dictionaries available on-line are:

Webster's Thesaurus (http://www.m-w.com/thesaurus.htm)
The Bartlett dictionary of familiar quotations (http://www.bartleby.com/99/index.html)
The free on-line dictionary of computing (http://foldoc.doc.ic.ac.uk/foldoc/index.html)
The Logos multilingual dictionary (http://www.logos.it/owa-wt/html_logos.home?lang=en)

Conclusion.

The number of academic writing resources on the Internet continues to increase - a massive collection of materials is already available on-line. Books are probably still the primary reference source used for the teaching and learning of writing. Yet it is not hard to imagine a time, as the availability of computers increases and the range of software expands, when on-line resources will take over as the first choice of reference for both students and teachers alike. The advantages of on-line resources are numerous:

Accessibility - Installation of a single terminal gives the teacher immediate access to a huge amount of information and resources. As the cost of computers, particularly second hand ones, continues to decrease, the cost of buying large numbers of books is becoming less economically viable - particularly for poor or developing areas and schools.

Immediacy - Especially for younger students, the Internet offers stimulation and an immediacy that books don't provide. New software also provides interactive learning opportunities that can cater for a much wider and varied student population. As the depth of teaching resources available grows and the computer literacy of the student population develops, teachers too are being given the impetus to make academic writing lessons more meaningful to their students.

Quick reference - Internet search engines provide quick and easy answers to students' questions and a convenient way to access large volumes of information for teachers.

Variety - As the number and variety of on-line resources expand, teachers can increasingly cater to their students' English proficiency when choosing resources in OWLs. Sites are being designed specifically for different language levels as well as different functions. Similarly, many ESL students are able to use resources developed for native English speakers while others benefit more from resources developed for non-native English speakers.

Computer training - One suggestion in favour of promoting OWLs argues that they can be used as an introductory medium for those who are new users of the Internet. Before anyone can access writing sites, they must, of course, be at least minimally computer literate. Teachers must be aware of a student's level of computer literacy when directing them to sites. However, many

sites are well sign-posted and easy to navigate - ideal for the first time Internet user.

Students are usually more interested in what they are writing than how to write. Time spent accessing and studying about academic writing may be considered boring and time consuming. On-line resources may be useful tools for assisting teachers and students to improve writing skills, but the sites are not a cure for all writing problems. One study (*E-mail as a tutoring medium* http://english.ttu.edu/kairos/2.2/features/double%5Fagent/elec%5Ftut.html) has already found that OWL users are mainly using the labs for correcting their work rather than developing their writing style. One is hopeful, however, that in the future, the very existence of these sites and their user-friendly nature will encourage students to spend a little more time not only on improving their correctness, but also on developing their ability to write well.

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