

Defining needs, setting targets and looking at strategies
Writing

You have decided to improve your writing skills but you are not sure about which area to work on. Before you can set a target for your independent study plan you will need to take the following steps:

1. Think about why you want to improve your writing skills.
2. Work out more precisely where your main problems are in writing.
3. Find out what causes your problems and which skills and techniques you may need to work on.

1. Why do you want to improve your writing skills?

Think about the following reasons, tick the one(s) that most affect you and add your own if they do not match your situation.

- I need to write my essays and exams in English.
- Writing well will help me when I start applying for jobs – it creates a good impression.
- I have to take a test before graduating and it involves a writing component.
- I would like to be able to write better as people think your English is bad if you can't write well.
- I want to use writing as a way to practise new vocabulary and grammar work
- Add your own _____

2. What are your problems in writing?

There could be various reasons why your writing skills are weak. Look at the specific problems related to writing below and tick any problems you have.

a) My grammar is weak and I make many mistakes – sometimes my meaning is not clear.		b) My vocabulary is weak – I don't know the right words to use.		c) I'm not clear about the purpose of the text I need to write.		d) I don't have any ideas about what to say.	
e) My paragraph structure is weak.		f) don't know how to connect the ideas together well in a text.		g) I can't organise my ideas very well.		h) I cannot say things clearly and I repeat the same phrases / ideas too much.	

b) Are there any other factors which cause you problems when writing in English?

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3. How to identify your problems if you are not sure what they are

What if you don't know your problems in writing? Sometimes it's difficult to know exactly what the causes of our problems are. You may need to get help to assess your problems in writing if you cannot do it yourself.

Here are some ways you can help yourself:

- Look at samples of your work from a previous English course at HKBU or, if you are a year 1 student, from form 7. Study your teacher's comments – they may give you an idea of your weak areas.
- Swap a text with a friend / study partner and check each other's writing – it's much easier to find mistakes in someone else's text than your own.
- If you currently have an English course, ask your teacher to give you some feedback on your writing.
- Ask a friendly lecturer from your home department to put some comments about your writing skills on an assignment.
- Book an appointment with the Language Centre WES (Writing Enhancement Service)
- Ask someone who has better English than you to take a look at a piece of written work and give comments. You could ask a friend, family member, international student if you are friendly with someone, etc.....

4. Techniques to use for your problems

b) Have a look at some suggested techniques and strategies – there could be many more. Mark the ones you think would be interesting and useful for you.

Skills and techniques that will help you improve on the problems above.

1. Grammar

- Revising areas where you regularly make mistakes
- Trying to learn new grammar areas
- Learning grammar from a new source – from reading texts you enjoy, for example
- Using different media (types of material) from those you used in the past, eg Internet, software programmes

2. Vocabulary

- Learning words related to the topic before you write about it
- Improving your general basic vocabulary
- Learning more specific words, eg connecting phrases, words for building up arguments, etc
- Revising new vocabulary before writing so you can activate words you've recently learned

3. Purpose of writing

- Think who the audience (the target reader) will be
- Analyse the question if it is an assignment and look for key words
- Consider the purpose of the writing task – think about your objectives in writing

4. Lack of ideas

- Think about the content before writing
- Spend time planning
- Brainstorm ideas before starting to write
- Use different techniques to jot down your thoughts; mind mapping, diagrams, etc
- Read around the topic before you think of your own ideas, then respond to the ideas you have read

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5. Weak paragraph structure

- Find some study materials to help you write a better paragraph
- Think about the topic sentence – main idea
- Plan your supporting ideas and give examples before you start to write the paragraph.

6. Connecting ideas

- Learn more linking phrases
- Use more words to refer back to ideas you mentioned earlier in the text
- Plan the first sentence of each paragraph so it links with the previous one.
- Look at the techniques in 'Organising ideas' too

7. Organising ideas

- Plan well before writing
- Organise your ideas in a graphic format (mind map, diagram, etc)
- Sequence your ideas after brainstorming them
- Make sure the order is logical and helps develop your argument

8. Repeating phrases / ideas

- Work on redundancy and try to avoid it
- After planning ideas, make notes from your key words before writing.
- Check your writing for repetitious words / phrases when editing.

5. Summarising your needs

*Write a short statement summarizing your **purpose** and **problems** in writing.*

6. Writing a Target

Now write a target for your writing study plan. Remember that your target should be measurable and achievable, appropriate for your needs, and include a time-frame.