

Tips for Writing in English as a Second Language

1) General life strategies:

- Learn new idiomatic expressions all the time (e.g. “a penny for your thoughts,” “back to square one,” “barking up the wrong tree,” “the ball is in your court,” “ballpark figure, etc.)
- Learn new words, especially words used all the time in your field of study (e.g. in Applied Linguistics: contrastive rhetoric, lexicography, interlinguistics, pragmatics, discourse analysis, computer-mediated communication, generative linguistics, etc.)
- Find out about specific differences between your first language and English.
 - o *E.g. English vs. Chinese: In English much information is carried by the use of auxiliaries and by verb inflections: is/are/were, eat/eats/ate/eaten, etc. Chinese, on the other hand, is an uninflected language and conveys meaning through word order, adverbials or shared understanding of the context. The concept of time in Chinese is not handled through the use of different tenses and verb forms, as it is in English. Here are some typical verb/tense mistakes:*
 - *What do you do? (i.e., What are you doing?) (wrong tense)*
 - *I will call you as soon as I will get there. (wrong tense)*
 - *She has got married last Saturday. (wrong tense)*
 - *She good teacher. (missing copula)*
 - *How much you pay for your car? (missing auxiliary)*
 - *I wish I am rich. (indicative instead of subjunctive)*

(copied from <http://esl.fis.edu/grammar/langdiff/>)
- Search actively for opportunities to speak English:
 - o Make friends with people who are native speakers of English and who can help you with your writing and your speaking skills.
 - o Find a girlfriend or boyfriend or new friend whose first language is English.
 - o Get active in a club or a sing in a choir.
 - o Take a community class (pottery, cooking, etc.)
 - o Volunteer somewhere.
 - o Start a blog in English on a specific topic (swimming, food, etc.) and comment on other people’s blogs to create a community.
 - o Visit fanfiction.net and join a community of writers.
- Find magazines and websites that write IN ENGLISH about your hobbies (swimming, computers, etc.) and read them as often as you can (on the bus, between classes, etc.). Read for fun!
- Read **aloud** in English, consciously (look at what prepositions are used, where articles are placed, what tenses are used, etc.) for FIVE minutes every day.
- Watch movies in English (after you have read a summary of the movie in your first language or in English, first).

- Watch TV in English with ENGLISH subtitles.
- Look at friendship/international resources on and off campus.

2) Specific strategies for your papers/theses/dissertations:

- Find a good writers' handbook!
- **Switch to the ENGLISH version of Microsoft Word on your computer!**
- Learn how to use Microsoft Word efficiently (e.g. do you know how to indent the references in your reference list? Or how to insert page breaks?)
- Learn what a good thesis statement is.
- KNOW WHAT MISTAKES YOU ALWAYS MAKE! Find patterns of mistakes (e.g. tenses, articles). Learn to self-edit your own mistakes.
- **Don't focus on grammar/spelling/punctuation** when you start writing!
 FOCUS ON IDEAS FIRST! (maybe in your first language)
- Work on organizing your ideas:
 - o Brainstorm in your first language before you start writing in English,
 - o Use detailed outlines to create your texts,
 - o Read books and articles about the subject,
 - o Create a database to keep track of ideas and articles, etc.
- Ask for help on how to do research in the library and online (<http://www.library.ualberta.ca/>)
- Make sure to learn how to cite, quote, and summarize other people's ideas to avoid plagiarism (keep a database of quotations and important information you may want to use more than once, with a detailed description of the source of this information).
- Ask teachers/TAs to see examples of "good" writing in your specific field and ask your classmates to show you how they write things
- Read previously written papers/theses/dissertations in your field to learn more about the format. Read academic articles related to your field.
- Make lists of expressions that "sound good" in textbooks and articles (e.g. "It should be noted that...", "According to...", "As already stated...", etc.) (no need to cite these!)
- Learn to find clues that will help you understand texts and assignment descriptions better:
 - o Abstracts
 - o Introductions and conclusions of articles
 - o First and last sentences of each paragraph
 - o Keywords ("data analysis," etc.)
 - o Transition words ("on the other hand," "in addition," "however," etc.)
- Don't be afraid to ask questions to your profs, TAs, friends, classmates, roommates, etc.
- Start writing early, not at the last minute, so you have time to make several revisions and to have someone else read your paper! Work on your TIME MANAGEMENT skills!
- Breathe and don't panic!
- Go to the Centre for Writers ☺