Outline of Academic Writing Class for MPI for Human Development

Structure and timing

In the winter semester: 7 meetings of 2 hours each.
In the summer semester: 7 meetings of 2 hours each

Pedagogic approach

The course aims to establish an atmosphere that is somewhere between a creative writing group and a seminar. Participants should not only begin to see themselves as writers, but start a process that will ultimately turn them into writers. Therefore, one of the key aspects is to get writing from the beginning. Students will write a short piece (1–2 pages) and work on it over the course of a few weeks, improving and correcting their own writing based on what they have learned in the course. The course will also involve instruction-based learning, task-based learning and discussion-based learning.

Course outline

The course is divided into 4 parts to be completed over two semesters:

Winter semester Weeks 1–4: What is good writing?

We’ll start by getting enthusiastic about good writing and becoming good writers. Week 1 begins by discussing examples of good writing and by looking at classic advice on writing from authors like George Orwell. We would then move on to discussing the deadly sins and virtuous habits of writing over the subsequent weeks. Over the first four weeks, students will work on a piece of writing in their spare time – probably a book review, revising it each week in light of what they have learned. Week 4 might involve presenting polished versions of their book reviews to the group.
Winter semester Weeks 5–7: Grammar – the toolkit for good writing.

The course will then move on to look at grammar issues and how they affect historical writing. I will place a particular emphasis on tense and will go back and review the basics of tense, but will also offer a more advanced look at how to use tense in context – i.e., going beyond a rigid “one event–one tense” approach. Other issues will include transitive and intransitive verbs, conditionals, reported speech, etc. Over these weeks, students will write a short narrative opening for a book chapter that describes a particular event or set of events and their consequences – they will then correct this over the course of a few weeks as they learn more about tense and grammar.

Summer semester Weeks 1–3: Punctuation, presentation and style guides.

Weeks 1–3 will look at the mechanics of writing and presentation – how to punctuate and present documents in English. It introduces style guides and illustrates the differences between British and American English in this regard. We will also discuss any specific advice typically given to historians. During this period, rather than writing something new, participants will go over existing pieces of writing (perhaps the pieces they wrote in the first semester, or any other work they have done) and correct those in accordance with particular styles.

Summer semester Weeks 4–7: How to make arguments in English-language writing

These four sessions will look at a range of different issues. First, we will discuss what is distinctive about English-language argumentative writing (i.e., its directness, use of topic sentences). We will then look at what Richard Marius and Melvin Page describe as the modes of historical writing: narration, description, exposition and persuasion. Finally, we will look at how narrative structures can be used to pull these different elements into a larger piece of work. Over these four weeks, students will work on a 3-4 page essay on a historical topic and will try to bring these different elements together effectively. The final week will involve presenting polished pieces to others in the group.