



SUPPORT FOR YOUR ESSAY

When you write academic essays you must ensure that you adequately PROVE each of your main points. Many students write essays full of opinions and generalisations without the factual details needed to support their ideas.

Each of your paragraphs will have one main idea, expressed in a topic sentence. You must support your topic sentences with concrete support, ie. specific information, factual details. Your opinions will need factual support and even some statements that are considered facts will need further support.

For example

It is not good enough to say:

Teenage smoking is on the rise.

You need to add some concrete support such as:

In 1995 the US surgeon general reported that teenage smokers had increased in number by more than 5% since 1990 (Carey, 1996).

Types of support:

Some of the more common types of support are: **1) Examples, 2) Statistics, and 3) Quotations, Paraphrases, Summaries.**

In the following paragraphs you will find these 3 types of support.

Some fathers are telecommuting or have part-time jobs that allow them to spend more time with their kids. For example, telecommuting gives advertising executive Ron Stemple time to take his children to school and pick them up. He can also drive them to their after-school activities. A 1997 study by job placement agency Executive Search, Inc. reported that between 57 and 78 percent of men would be willing to reduce their work hours and their salaries to spend more time with their children - (Jones, 1997).

According to the experts, Dad does just as well as Mom at parenting. As Joan Grant of the New York Department of Social Services stated, "Men are just as capable as women of taking care of their children's needs, including preparing nutritious meals, dispensing love, discipline, and band-aids and providing a happy home environment - (Brash, 1999).

(adapted from Oshima and Hogue (1998). Writing Academic English)

Support type 1: Examples, extended examples

Examples or extended examples (anecdotes or short stories) are perhaps the easiest kind of supporting details to use. You can often take examples from your own knowledge or personal experiences and moreover, such examples often make your writing enjoyable to read. Be careful, however, when using personal examples for your academic writing: they are often considered weak support. Be sure they really prove your point. For example, when showing that on average, men are better drivers than women, don't use famous racing car drivers as examples of male drivers because professional drivers aren't average men.



Related resources:
Effective paraphrasing
Referencing

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Read the following model paragraphs which contain examples used as support for a main idea. Note that the first paragraph contains examples, the second contains an extended example. Notice the transition signals –

Take, for example... and The following incident illustrates...

Model paragraph:

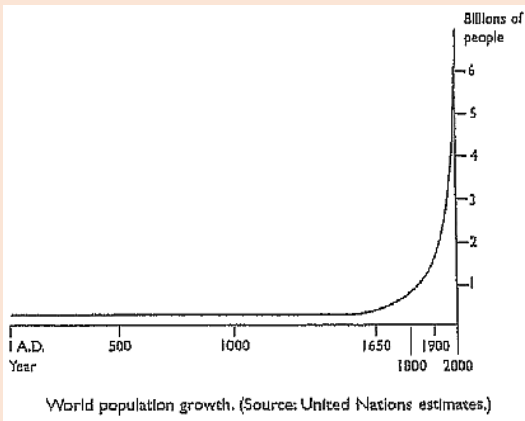
Nonverbal communication, or body language, is communication by facial expressions, head or eye movements, hand signals, and body postures. It can be just as important to understanding as words are. Misunderstandings – often amusing but sometimes serious – can arise between people from different cultures if they misinterpret nonverbal signals. Take, for example, the differences in meaning of a gesture very common in the United States: a circle made with the thumb and index finger. To an American, it means that everything is OK. To a Japanese, it means that you are talking about money. In France, it means that something is worthless, and in Greece, it is an obscene gesture. Therefore, an American could unknowingly offend a Greek by using that particular hand signal.

The following incident illustrates how conflicting nonverbal signals can cause serious misunderstandings. While lecturing to his poetry class at Ain Shams University in Cairo, a British professor became so relaxed that he leaned back in his chair and revealed the bottom of his foot to the astonished class. Making such a gesture in Muslim society is the worst kind of insult. The next day, the Cairo newspapers carried headlines about the student demonstration that resulted, and they denounced British arrogance and demanded that the professor be sent home.

(adapted from Oshima and Hogue (1998). Writing Academic English)

Support type 2: Statistics

In business, engineering and the sciences, statistics are often used for support. Here is a graph and a paragraph that uses the statistics in this graph for its supporting sentences.



Model paragraph:

The world's population has been increasing rapidly. According to a United Nations chart of world population growth (U.N.D.P, 1990), the world's population suddenly multiplied in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. At the beginning of the Christian era, the estimated world population was 200 to 300 million. It took more than 1,800 years for the population to reach one billion. Then in less than one hundred years, the figure doubled to two billion by 1930. By 1975, when it reached four billion, it had doubled again in less than fifty years. The United Nations has projected an increase to more than six billion by the year 2000.

You will see that the topic sentence has been supported with statistical information – all gained from one graph. Note how the source is given. This is an in-text reference. You will need to check your course outline to find out whether you need to use the in-text system or a footnote/endnote system.

(adapted from Oshima and Hogue (1998). Writing Academic English)

Support type 3: Quotations, Paraphrases and Summaries

In academic writing you are expected to show that you have read widely and have found information from your reading to support your ideas. When you include information from a book, newspaper, magazine, encyclopedia, dictionary or nonprint sources such as TV programmes, CD-Roms or the Internet, you will use either quotation, paraphrase or summary.

Quotations

Direct quotations should be used sparingly (no more than 5% of the word count of your essay). They should only be used when they are much clearer and more effective than you could write, or when they have used ordinary words in a special technical sense. You must copy exactly word-for word, including errors, different spellings and emphasis marks (eg. bold type, italics).

Read the following model paragraph beginning and study how a quotation is used to support the topic sentence. Note the punctuation around the quotations and in-text references. Note also such devices as three dots ... (the student has left out part of the original sentence as it wasn't relevant to the essay) and brackets [] - the student has inserted a word of their own in order to make the quoted sentence more suitable for the essay's context.

It is no secret that performance-enhancing drugs have been used by Olympic athletes for decades. In 1993, the head of the International Olympic Committee's medical commission, Prince Alexandre de Merode of Belgium, stated "I believe that as many as 10% of all [Olympic] athletes ...are regular users of performance-enhancing drugs"(Bamburger & Yaeger, 1994, p. 63).

NB. If there is a grammar mistake in the original, you use brackets with *sic* to indicate that there was an error in the original: eg. *It is no secret that performance-enhancing drugs has [sic] been used...*

Paraphrases and Summaries

As opposed to quotations, which should be used sparingly, paraphrases and summaries will be used frequently in your academic writing to support your ideas. A **paraphrase** is a writing skill in which you "rephrase" (rewrite) information from an outside source in your own words without changing its meaning. Because you include in your rewriting all, or nearly all, of the content of the original passage, a paraphrase is almost as long. A **summary**, by contrast, is much shorter than the original. A summary includes only the main ideas of someone else's writing restated in your own words.

Points to remember in both paraphrasing and summarising:

1. You must not change the meaning of the original.
2. You must avoid plagiarising ie. writing a paraphrase or part of a summary in words that are too close to the original.

Model paraphrase and summary :

Original passage:

Language is the main means of communication between peoples. But so many different languages have developed that language has often been a barrier rather than an aid to understanding among peoples. For many years, people have dreamed of setting up an international, universal language which all people could speak and understand. The arguments in favour of a universal language are simple and obvious. If all peoples spoke the same tongue, cultural and economic ties might be much closer, and good will might increase between countries (Kispert, 1990).

Paraphrase:

Humans communicate through language. However, because there are so many languages in the world, language is an obstacle rather than an aid to communication. For a long time, people have wished for an international language that speakers all over the world could understand. A universal language would certainly build cultural and economic bonds. It would also create better feelings among countries (Kispert, 1990).

You will notice that in the paraphrase both the sentence structure and the vocabulary are different from the original.

Now take a look at the summary of the same original passage. When you summarise you compress large amounts of information into the fewest possible sentences.

Summary:

People communicate mainly through language; however, having so many different languages creates communication barriers. Some think that one universal language could bring countries together culturally and economically and also increase good feelings among them (Kispert, 1990).

(adapted from Oshima and Hogue (1998). Writing Academic English)