



REVIEW

A simple guide to unpacking assignments and dissertations

Arthur, R. (2026). *Ultimate academic writing hacks: Simple strategies for better essays, reports and dissertations*. Bloomsbury Academic. ISBN 9781350517431

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Ryan Arthur's *Ultimate Academic Writing Hacks* offers a true reflection of his experience and commitment to helping students strengthen and enhance their academic work. As the title suggests, the book uses a simple, conversational writing style while retaining an appropriate academic tone. The term 'hacks' in the title is used tactfully, offering an accessible way to present robust, evidence-based academic literacy strategies. In a time marked by increasing reliance on generative AI (GenAI), often seen by students as a 'quick fix' for academic challenges in place of reading long, traditional textbooks, the book's title functions as a student-friendly invitation to engage with the development of their academic writing.

The book covers a wide range of topics useful for foundation year, undergraduate, and postgraduate students. It is particularly valuable for those who are new to higher education (HE) and seeking to develop a clear understanding of how to produce academic essays and assignments. This includes conventional students, non-traditional adult learners, first-generation university students, and international students alike. Each chapter focuses on a different academic practice and can be used independently, allowing students and staff to benefit from the material without needing to read the book from cover to cover. The chapters offer numerous examples and templates to help students begin writing their assignments and

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gradually build the academic skills needed for successful progression through university. The first seven parts of the book offer comprehensive guidance on all aspects of assignment writing. The material covers everything from techniques for finding appropriate sources, to structuring introductions, the main body, and conclusions, to developing different types of arguments. It also supports students in integrating academic literature, real-life examples, and theoretical frameworks into their assignments. In addition, it provides clear guidance on engaging critically with academic texts and developing reflective, analytical writing. The final, eighth part of the book offers detailed support on the capstone element of undergraduate and postgraduate study: writing a dissertation.

It is common for students to experience academic writing anxiety, and this can significantly influence their motivation to write (Busse et al., 2023; Deniz & Demir, 2024). In the last few years, GenAI has become a widely used tool for completing assignments, often as a way to overcome these writing challenges. However, increasing dependence on such tools not only places students at risk of academic misconduct but may also gradually weaken their cognitive and critical thinking skills (Valcea et al., 2024). This growing reliance highlights the need for resources that support students in developing their writing abilities. Arthur's book meets this need by offering practical guidance supported by structured techniques to help students understand their tasks and build confidence in their academic writing, ultimately empowering them to produce original work. The examples and techniques can be adapted to suit students' individual needs and academic disciplines, offering valuable opportunities for creative thinking. This can not only enhance their university experience but also prepare them for effective communication in their future careers.

In addition, given the increased focus on widening participation in HE, and the growing number of HE providers in the UK serving non-traditional adult learners (Independent Higher Education, 2025) who often struggle with academic writing and study skills, this book is an opportune and valuable publication. These students are expected to navigate the hidden curriculum in HE (Hinchcliffe, 2020), which in this context is the unspoken rules of academic discourse, institutional expectations, and the tacit norms that shape how academic work is produced. In my experience of teaching adult learners from non-traditional backgrounds, many of whom have been out of education for several years, I have seen them struggle to structure assignments and feel overwhelmed by the demands of academic writing. This



challenge is often compounded by the pressure of engaging with unfamiliar concepts in the subject they are studying, creating an excessive cognitive load (Sweller, 1988). In some cases, this can lead students to rely on GenAI, which can result in academic misconduct when detected, and even when undetected can undermine their confidence and motivation to continue their studies. The book's first three chapters offer clear guidance on using evidence, conducting critical research, and understanding assignment tasks, types, and structure, all of which can be particularly beneficial for these students.

The book is equally valuable for international students, helping them navigate the hidden curriculum and develop academic prose, particularly the critical tone, evidence-based reasoning, and direct argumentation expected within Western academic traditions. The chapters offering guidance on building arguments, critiquing academic texts, and incorporating theories, models, and frameworks into assignments are especially useful for these students.

A notable feature of the book is its use of accessible language paired with practical examples and templates. This approach reduces barriers to understanding, especially where complex academic language can sometimes make comprehension more difficult. This book could be a valuable resource for students, giving them both the confidence to develop their academic writing skills. Students can use this book as a self-study guide, gradually building their academic writing skills through the examples provided. It is also a valuable resource for learning developers and foundation year lecturers. It can support the design of academic writing workshops, can be incorporated into teaching sessions, or be used in one-to-one support with students. While having specific relevance for the humanities and social sciences, the examples and templates can be easily adapted for workshops across different disciplines.

In a book of 'hacks', there will always be certain areas that need further development; for instance, reading is an essential component of assignment writing, as the two processes are closely interconnected. The absence of explicit guidance on critical reading in this book therefore feels like an area that could be developed further in future editions. Furthermore, in the dissertation section, although the part on developing a research aim offers some support on identifying a topic, a section with more detailed guidance on selecting and refining a research topic would have provided greater clarity for students.



Overall, the book provides a strong basis for students seeking to develop their academic writing and enhance their assignment-writing abilities. With the growing emphasis on equality, diversity, and inclusion within postgraduate research, it is increasingly clear that the foundation, undergraduate, and taught postgraduate years play a crucial role in developing students' academic writing abilities, fostering originality, and nurturing an interest in scholarly work. These skills need to be cultivated early, as they underpin students' confidence, independence, and long-term academic progression. This book provides valuable guidance to help students develop these academic writing skills from the very start of their university journey. What distinguishes *Ultimate Academic Writing Hacks* from long-form study-skills textbooks is its clearly explained techniques for producing and improving academic work, combined with an engaging writing style. In doing so, Arthur helps bridge the gap between student anxiety and academic expectations by demystifying the conventions of academic writing in an approachable format. The book's clarity, brevity, and practical focus make it a valuable resource for a wide range of learners and a useful addition to a university library.

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The authors used the following generative AI tools in the preparation of this manuscript: Microsoft Copilot. Microsoft Copilot was used solely to support proofreading tasks focusing on identifying grammatical and syntactical issues. All ideas, arguments, and critical reflections in this review are entirely the author's own. The author has complied with the journal's principles of AI use.

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