



## Course Concepts Writing Skills

**All the Course Concepts focus on skills and are based on general principles set out in the introduction to the series. One of these principles is that skills are not acquired by the learner being told about them, but rather by actually doing things themselves, or to put it another way - we learn by actively engaging in a learning process. The teacher's job is to provide suitable and sufficient support.**

**What follows here are some specifics for the Writing Skills courses. This will give an overview of what kind of writing skills are taught, and why and how.**

There are many different ways of approaching the teaching of writing skills, even at this relatively advanced level. What may be perfect for a group of students who already enjoy writing English may not be so suitable for those who still struggle to write a few lines. To meet such diverse needs I designed and taught a range of writing courses.

Here, there are two different course concepts described, with one building on the other, and progressing from B1/B2 to C1/C2 on the CEFR<sup>1</sup>. I found these to be effective and satisfying for students who needed to learn within a short period of time how to write clearly structured texts in acceptable English. They are suitable for any students, not just those majoring in English.

Both concepts are based on the principle mentioned above, that learners are more likely to acquire skills and knowledge if they are actively involved themselves and are given sufficient appropriate support. Acquiring dictionary skills for example, and learning how to be a critical reader of your own work are basics for becoming a competent writer. The former is relatively easy, the latter is more challenging.

Both concepts have a logical progression of tasks. Both involve a great deal of interaction in class.

Both focus on helping students to structure their thinking logically and acquire the English to signpost their argumentation.

Neither of the courses set out to teach creative writing; instead the aim was to teach them how to write a short well-structured easily understandable text in relatively formal language. This is a skill which is necessary at university (in

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<sup>1</sup> Council of Europe (2017). *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment*.

any language) and very useful in the outside world. As it says in the Essay Writing Handout:

Some people are gifted writers. Most of us are not. It is possible, however, to learn how to write a good essay, which just means a clear text, and to write it relatively quickly.

[[http://www.findyourfeet.de/usr/doc/FyF\\_cm\\_essaywriting.pdf](http://www.findyourfeet.de/usr/doc/FyF_cm_essaywriting.pdf)].

In both Writing Skills Concepts the type of texts to be written is specified. The lower level course progresses from a short personal text, a CV and various summaries to writing an essay. The higher level course progresses from a short personal text, through one-paragraph statements of opinion to essays.

Although the text types are specified for each course, the actual topics have to be chosen carefully for each separate group of learners. These topics should be in some way relevant to the students' lives so that they feel motivated to think and write about them. The work they then produce shows clearly that they have engaged with the topic, and is interesting for the teacher to read. Another benefit of relevant topics is that students are more willing to invest time in language correction work when they are learning how to express more clearly their own ideas and opinions.

I provided the students with a great deal of assistance, in various forms. There were course materials and handouts available as pdf files on my website [[www.FindYourFeet.de](http://www.FindYourFeet.de)]. There were additional short texts, mostly extracts from contemporary popular fiction, to illustrate particular grammar points, for example the use of narrative tenses or expressing hypothesis. For these please see the Appendix.

There were Language Correction sheets to work on, based on their own or typical errors from the writing of previous classes. There were Comment sheets to talk through and think about, where I offered a different perspective on a topic they had written about, and provided additional useful language, and titles of related books or films.

There were tutorials, and not least there was the way I marked their written work. Details of this are in the course descriptions below.

For all students it is quite difficult to get a realistic idea of how good their written English is. Many have had very little experience of writing English at school. Despite this, some may have already been required to write a term paper in English for another Department. This rather absurd situation means that students who get a good grade on a subject paper believe their English is good. These misconceptions may need to be brought out into the open and discussed. It can be helpful to have the students look at the B2/C1 levels on the Self-Assessment Checklists in the European Language Portfolio.

"I can" checklists organized by CEFR level (A1, A2, B1, B2, C1, C2) and communicative activity (listening, reading, spoken interaction, spoken production, writing) are used not only to evaluate learning outcomes, but to identify learning targets and

monitor learning progress. In other words, self-assessment based on checklists embraces planning and monitoring as well as evaluation. It is formative in the sense that it helps to give direction to the learning process.

[<https://www.coe.int/en/web/portfolio/self-assessment-grid>].

However, the teacher also needs to make it clear what they understand by accuracy of language, with reference to each individual class. The level of accuracy required of future teachers of English, for example, may be higher than that expected of other learners.

## **COURSE DESCRIPTION**

### **Writing Skills: Basic Academic Writing**

The following is a typical description of the lower level course as it appeared in the Term Programme. It was handed out to the participants at the first meeting of class, along with additional information, and talked through in detail.

**Target group:** This course is aimed primarily at 2nd-year students of English. It is not suitable for students in their first semester as writing English presupposes a knowledge of grammar and vocabulary, so it makes sense to attend a Grammar and a Reading/Vocabulary class first.

**Course aims:** This course will equip students with guidelines on how to write a variety of text types, namely CV, summary, formal letter, and essay, and give writing practice both in class and at home, and individual feedback. Participants will learn about text construction and suitable style, how to make good use of the dictionary to improve their written English, and become independent learners.

**Materials:** Students will be expected to bring a copy of a good advanced level learners dictionary to class each week, if possible the Collins COBUILD Advanced Dictionary.

All other materials will be provided. Most are available on my website: [[www.FindYourFeet.de](http://www.FindYourFeet.de)]. Please print and bring with you: Writer Reader, Using Cobuild, Logical Links, Writing Summaries, Essay Writing, Punctuation, Emphasis, CV, and Formal Letters.

**Credits:** To gain credits for the course students are required to attend regularly, complete all assignments regularly, produce a portfolio of their work and sit a final essay test. They are also required to attend a tutorial at least once.

Please note that regular completion of written assignments really means regular and spread over the whole term. There is no way you can just hand in a bundle of writing at the end of term. The

drafting, writing, correcting has to be done regularly. That is the only way to learn.

Additional information:

Writing is taught and practised in this class as a process of thinking, structuring your thoughts, writing a draft, correcting it yourself before handing it in. That is, you learn by actually doing, rather than just by being told how to do it or just what mistakes you have made. This learning is spread over the whole term.

This process approach to writing means that you have to budget for work outside class: sometimes an hour will be enough, but more often you will need at least two. When you hand in a piece of work, I “symbol” mark it and give it back to you to correct if necessary. You work on it, then take it to the tutorial to discuss it with the tutor. When the tutor is happy with it they will sign and date it. With the really important key written assignments e.g. the CV, I will want you to hand in your final version to me too, for checking and grading. Then it counts as a completed assignment.

At the end of the term you should have a portfolio of all your own work, clearly documenting your progress:-) and ready to hand in.

One final piece of advice to make sure the class goes well: get the contact details of at least two neighbours here today so that you can contact them if you are off sick. Please make it your own responsibility to find out exactly what you missed and what you have to do to catch up. And those who give the information: please don't be mean and give only a tiny part of it. You wouldn't like it if someone did that to you.

One or two comments on the course description:

1) Dictionary: the reason for recommending a particular dictionary is that it proved to be an excellent tool for learners. In fact, for many years while the degree exams for students majoring in English included an essay and a translation from German into English, this is the dictionary which was specified for use. It made sense overall to encourage students from the very start to learn how to use it effectively. There were copies in the library, but having their own for long-term use was the better option.

2) Tutorials: I believe they are absolutely necessary if students are to make real progress during the term. They are an opportunity for the teacher to get to know each individual student better and to give the detailed advice that each one needs. But is it always possible to find the time? When my workload was too heavy, the university provided some funding for students to do the tutoring. You need to find the right person (a good command of English, ability to communicate and interact with students etc.), and mentor this person. Having students hold the tutorials turned out to be a very profitable experience for all concerned.

3) Contact details of classmates: encouraging students to talk to the people around them from the very start is an integral part of the course. It is also a good idea to ask them to put their first name on a card, written big enough to be seen across the room. In every class I had a card with my name on it, first name on one side, second name on the other. They could use whichever they felt comfortable with.

### **Step by step through the course:**

As can be seen above, the course progresses from CV and Summaries, via Formal Letters to Essay Writing. The reasons for this choice of text type are given below. At each step in this course I talked with the students about why I was asking them to do certain things. The course begins, however, with something unusual, completely unexpected.

### **Memory: First day at the University**

Materials required: Sheets of blank A4 paper, one each  
From FyF: Writer Reader, Using Cobuild  
[[http://www.findyourfeet.de/usr/doc/FyF\\_cm\\_writerreader.pdf](http://www.findyourfeet.de/usr/doc/FyF_cm_writerreader.pdf)].  
[[http://www.findyourfeet.de/usr/doc/FyF\\_cm\\_usingcobuild.pdf](http://www.findyourfeet.de/usr/doc/FyF_cm_usingcobuild.pdf)].

There are many steps in this unit between writing a short text and being able in the end to correct their own work. They include learning how to use a dictionary effectively and finding out how to profit from my system of marking. It may seem at first like an unduly long process, but it is all intentional. Acquiring skills takes time.

Here the students are given the chance to write about themselves on a very special day, one which they have all experienced. I hand out some blank sheets of paper, and ask the students how they feel about that ....Some answers: a bit nervous, scared, interested, intrigued. They are asked to draw a picture frame on the sheet, any kind of frame they want. Some use a ruler, others create the most baroque of frames.

**The task** is now to think back to their first day at university and draw it for me. (“Oh cool” or “I can’t draw!....”) Then turn over the sheet and try to write about it, i.e. write about what they did, how they felt.

When I looked at their papers after class I looked at the drawings first, then the text. The drawings were always very impressive. The texts give a first insight into their command of English. This varies widely, both in quantity and quality; some students have great difficulty writing three or four lines in English.

T(Tense)

I symbol mark their texts e.g. “On the first day I have arrived at nine.” These are returned to the students in the next class, to be enjoyed (especially the drawings), and worked through at the end of the unit.

To focus on the language, the students are given a **Language Correction sheet** with a collection of typical mistakes from previous classes. These are organised in categories such as:

Words and phrases: People were running through the floors; In your study you have to read a lot of books; The paper on the blackboard told me that ...  
Punctuation: I didn't know, where to go  
Constructions/verb patterns: I felt like being alone in this chaos; I doubted to find the right rooms  
Tense: On the first day I have arrived at nine  
Adjective/adverb: The university looked ridiculously

There is a separate heading for German words they use such as Audimax, Fachschaft, Erstihütte, Mathevorkurs, all typical features of their new life at university. We talk about them first, not because it is wrong to use them in a text written for me, but simply as a challenge, imagining they are talking/writing to someone who does not understand German. I encourage them to find out what the German words really mean, so that they can find a way to express this in English. This is initial training in how not to rush to a translation dictionary.

Before the students can tackle the rest of the Language Correction sheet they need to do two things:

- (1) work their way through the Using Cobuild Handout
- (2) find out about my marking system from the Writer Reader Handout.

**The Using Cobuild Handout** is made up of a variety of tasks in four parts, aimed at helping students to use this monolingual dictionary effectively. All the tasks focus on typical language problems students have, whether German speakers or speakers of other languages.

The first task is:

A quiz to start you off. Try and answer the questions in this quiz – find the most suitable/the correct word. Do NOT use the dictionary at this stage, just your own heads. Do it quickly, quite spontaneously.

Items are e.g.

a) If you hate overcrowded trains you should avoid ..... at weekends.  
to travel?  
travelling?

b) Learning to use the Cobuild would be .....  
a big progress?  
big progress?  
big progresses?

[...].

[[http://www.findyourfeet.de/usr/doc/FyF\\_cm\\_usingcobuild.pdf](http://www.findyourfeet.de/usr/doc/FyF_cm_usingcobuild.pdf)].

Next they discuss with their neighbours which of these items they would expect to find a clear answer to in an English-English dictionary. This kind of task is usually new to them and interesting, as they are being asked to talk about their expectations of a dictionary, rather than being tested on their knowledge of English. I then turn the question round, asking them to decide which ones they do not expect to find an answer to in the dictionary. Nobody needs to provide a reason, just the number of the item. We then put a mark beside all the items which at least one person in the class did not expect to find a clear answer to. The first impression is usually that the overall class confidence in the dictionary is not too high.

But we were still not finished. If no one mentioned item (5) for example, I would say: Does that mean that everyone in the class is absolutely totally 100% sure they will find a clear answer in the dictionary??? They would gradually start to laugh, and before long someone would admit to perhaps maybe not being 100% sure. And so on. It was always done with good humour, and the focus was on the whole class as a group, not on the individual.

Now the task is to actually use the dictionary and see if they can find a clear answer. This can be done at home.

In the next session the students check what they found with their neighbours. (Checking their work with their neighbours can be a good way to start a class. It gives them the chance to talk, and the time to settle in and tune in.) Then everyone can say whether they found more, or less than they expected, and whether there were any items they did not find a clear answer to.

This set us off working through the items together, each person with their own dictionary, until we found an answer to all of them. This takes time, but is worth it, as being able to use a good monolingual dictionary effectively is one of the keys to good writing. The students are expected not only to use the dictionary at home but also to bring it with them to every session of class, and use it.

We then make a list of the kinds of information the Cobuild provides. In this way the students learn a great deal of grammar (e.g. parts of speech, count/uncount nouns, constructions, verb patterns) and a great deal about levels of formality, register, collocations, synonyms, regional and national varieties, pronunciation etc. and realise that they can find the answer to a lot of questions in the dictionary by themselves. This helps them along the path to being independent learners.

Incidentally, the Using Cobuild Handout includes a translation task to convince them that no matter whether they are writing or reading or translating, the Cobuild is an excellent tool. One of the items is:

Ich hatte grosse Schwierigkeiten, eine gute Übersetzung zu finden.

Without the dictionary this usually gets translated as \*I had big difficulties to find a good translation.

(2) Next they need some of the information from the **Writer Reader Handout**, which

aims to help you to be critical of your own writing and show you how to use and learn from the feedback you get from me.

In this handout there is

- (1) The concept behind my writing classes
- (2) Questions for you as the writer of your text and as the reader of your text
- (3) The correcting system I use
- (4) Some technicalities

[[http://www.findyourfeet.de/usr/doc/FyF\\_cm\\_writerreader.pdf](http://www.findyourfeet.de/usr/doc/FyF_cm_writerreader.pdf)].

With this information, in particular from **(3) The correcting system I use**, they can now work through the **Language Correction sheet** in pairs, which helps them to put into practice what they “learnt” in the Cobuild quiz. This can be checked together.

To finish off I draw their attention to a question at the bottom of the Language Correction sheet: What are you going to do with this sheet now, after all this work?

Answers are usually: put it in my folder, read it again, look at it ....

If you take the sheet from any student and hold it up, and ask them what they can see best: the typed part of the page (which is all wrong) or the handwriting at the side (their corrections), they realise that what immediately leaps to their attention is the typing .... so that every time they look at that page in future they will automatically focus on wrong English.

I suggest that if they want to learn from all their efforts in correcting the mistakes on this sheet, they should do three things, all time-consuming, but effective.

- (1) On a fresh sheet of paper write out all the correct English
- (2) On another sheet write out all the correct English but this time ordered meaningfully, rather than grammatically as on the original sheet
- (3) tear up the corrections sheet so that they will never see it again.

Some students actually take this advice:-) so that for every topic they have their own writing plus a sheet of correct language organised in a meaningful way. Now, finally, they can correct their own symbol-marked texts.

From this unit they can learn a lot:

A blank sheet of paper is not necessarily the prelude to a test. Everyone can draw. Sometimes students say they can't, but when they realise they are only being asked to give an impression, my experience is that they can do this very effectively. For instance, one drew in pencil a lonely little figure sitting on a chair, in the middle of emptiness. The challenge is to see if they can also convey this in words.

Their own experience has value.

They learn some English.

They learn how to remember what they “learned” in class.

They begin to learn how to use the dictionary, how I will mark their work, and how to go about correcting their own work.

They find out that it can be enjoyable and profitable to talk to others; this is important as interaction is an integral part of the course.

Finally, their drawings and texts are a particularly valuable part of their portfolios, to look back on in later years.

## Writing a CV

Materials required: Dictionary

From FyF: Writer Reader, Using Cobuild, CV, Logical Links

[[http://www.findyourfeet.de/usr/doc/FyF\\_ha\\_cv.pdf](http://www.findyourfeet.de/usr/doc/FyF_ha_cv.pdf)].

[[http://www.findyourfeet.de/usr/doc/FyF\\_cm\\_logicallinks.pdf](http://www.findyourfeet.de/usr/doc/FyF_cm_logicallinks.pdf)].

There are several very good reasons for choosing this text type, and for choosing it as the first real assignment: their task is a realistic one, they learn about summarising, about structuring a text i.e. organising information in coherent paragraphs, and how to choose appropriate language i.e. a more formal style than in a chatty email for example.

**The task** is to decide which English-speaking country they would like to study in, choose a university and write a CV in the traditional text form required for applications via the International Office of their own university.

Firstly, the students have to ask themselves the questions in the **Writer Reader Handout**, such as Who am I writing to, What will they know, and Why am I writing. Thinking about the question “What will they know” helps the students to understand that it makes little sense to write “I worked for the Fachschaft/the Sparkasse/the Südkurier”.

In essence, they are faced with the task of summarising their lives for a very particular readership. That is the first lesson in summary writing: before you can summarise you need to know who you are summarising for, what they will know already, and why you are doing it.

This also leads to very interesting discussions on different societies' opinions on what is relevant for the CV and raises awareness of just how different the German education system is from that of any of the English-speaking countries.

At the personal level students can learn a lot through having to look at their own lives from the outside, and often ask for advice on what to leave out, what to put in and how to express it. A good example is a student who asked: “My Mum and Dad were divorced, do I have to write that? (...) I lived alone with my Mum. She had to go to work all the time, and I was alone ...” After a while the student realised this could be expressed in a positive way: “As my mother and I lived alone she had to go out to work. This meant that I learned how to be independent at a very early age.”

In the **CV Handout** there are:

- (1) Some useful English expressions for typical features of the German education system (e.g. ein Praktikum, das Gymnasium besuchen, Leistungskurse, auf Bachelor studieren).
- (2) A guideline CV as a continuous text.
- (3) Some tips for writing a CV in the traditional text form required for applications via the university to study abroad (this covers more personal questions, such as what to put in, what to leave out).
- (4) Some useful books and websites including the European Curriculum Vitae Format [[www.europass.cedefop.europa.eu](http://www.europass.cedefop.europa.eu)], good for helping you focus on your abilities, not just on qualifications.

[[http://www.findyourfeet.de/usr/doc/FyF\\_ha\\_cv.pdf](http://www.findyourfeet.de/usr/doc/FyF_ha_cv.pdf)].

Using the information in the CV Handout, students draft their CV at home and bring it with them to class the following week. Draft does not mean a scribbled mess, but a correctly written piece of work that they can look at in class, with a critical eye, and share with their neighbours.

Questions in class about the draft texts:

Regarding the visual image of your/your neighbour's text: Can you see paragraphs? Or is it just one continuous text – or a shopping list? Check your text for paragraphing against the guideline CV.

There can also be quick checks for other things easily scanned for e.g. short forms such as I'm or don't, which they will not find in the guideline CV.

The next step is to read through the **Logical Links Handout**, which introduces them to more formal style logical links, i.e. the kind they might like to use in their CV.

This handout is about the words which are used to link ideas. It was written for use in Basic Academic Writing, to help students write a good CV, which is quite a formal kind of text. (1) A list of common logical link words (2) Tips on choosing the logical link words most suited to a formal text, e.g. a CV and a term paper („Hausarbeit“).

[[http://www.findyourfeet.de/usr/doc/FyF\\_cm\\_logicallinks.pdf](http://www.findyourfeet.de/usr/doc/FyF_cm_logicallinks.pdf)].

Their next task is linking up sentences to make a mini-text, for example:

I hope to become a teacher of English and Biology  
I was born in Munich  
I passed my A-levels in 6 subjects  
Before going to university I decided to spend a year in Canada

I am now in my third year at university  
I attended primary and secondary school in Munich  
I grew up speaking English and German  
I was born on 23rd June, 20xx  
I am now studying English and Biology  
My parents are Canadian  
In Canada I worked in a playgroup for a year  
I am studying in Konstanz

In pairs they try to reorganise this jumbled list of events into a sensible sequence, then link up the sentences to form a coherent paragraph. This is not easy as they are often not familiar with links such as “however”, “as”, “although”.

Next, they can do a quick scan of their own CV text to see how often “and”, “but”, “so”, occur so that they can think about whether they would like to replace one or two of these with something slightly more formal, as shown in the Logical Links Handout, and in the CV guideline.

**Language Correction work.** The next step is to look at language collected from previous students' CVs which needs to be corrected. The idea behind correction work of this kind is that students get the chance to realise what is not correct English and correct it, without having the feeling that their own work is being criticised. The mistakes can be simply underlined, but usually I symbol marked them as students still need help at this stage to identify the problem. The problems on this language correction sheet include:

Individual words or phrases: I visited High School, I want to get a journalist later, to get into contact with foreigners, to do an apprenticeship in a bank

Level of formality: it's great, lots, I'm

Tense: When I was in Canada I have learned

Aspect: At the moment I prepare

Constructions/verb patterns: My parents insisted on me to do ...

And a little translation task:

How would you say the following in English:

Ich bin zweisprachig aufgewachsen

Ich studiere im 5. Semester Englisch und Spanisch

These are examples of German-English from their CVs (\*I grew up bilingual; \*I study in the 5<sup>th</sup> semester English and Spanish) which I back-translated.

What is really important is that the students can find **all** the correct forms themselves with the tools available to them: CV Handout, Writer Reader Handout and the dictionary.

The final task is to rework their draft CV at home, and hand it in for marking and comment.

They also found it very interesting to read brief biographies of prominent people whose path through the education system was very different from that of the average (German) student. An example:

John X is the MP for West Dunbartonshire [...] and Chair of the House of Commons Treasury Committee. After leaving school at 15 without qualifications, he worked as a council weeder in Dumbarton and then in a factory. He started studying at 24 [...] He became a Visiting Professor at Strathclyde's Business School in 1994.

*Strathclyde People*, the magazine of Strathclyde University, Glasgow, Autumn 2009.

### Writing a summary

Materials required: Dictionary

From FyF: Writing Summaries, Emphasis

[[http://www.findyourfeet.de/usr/doc/FyF\\_cm\\_writingsummary.pdf](http://www.findyourfeet.de/usr/doc/FyF_cm_writingsummary.pdf)].

[[http://www.findyourfeet.de/usr/doc/FyF\\_cm\\_emphasis.pdf](http://www.findyourfeet.de/usr/doc/FyF_cm_emphasis.pdf)].

What we do in class is based on the **Writing Summaries Handout**:

This handout gives tips on how to write a summary of any kind of text, whether newspaper article or film. There are tips on how to structure a summary, how to keep the summary separate from your own comment, and there are useful English expressions.

It has five parts:

- (1) General comments on writing a summary
- (2) Writing a summary of an editorial
- (3) Writing a summary and comment on a documentary film
- (4) Writing a summary and comment on a book (fiction)
- (5) Writing a summary and comment on a feature film

[[http://www.findyourfeet.de/usr/doc/FyF\\_cm\\_writingsummary.pdf](http://www.findyourfeet.de/usr/doc/FyF_cm_writingsummary.pdf)].

There are two main messages in this handout: be relevant for the purpose in hand, as in the CV; keep your summary separate from your comment or interpretation. These are basic academic writing skills which need to be acquired.

I usually chose to work first on an editorial or similar, then a documentary film, and finally a book of their own choice. From writing summaries the students can learn a great deal:

Thinking about the purpose of each summary  
Discussing and arguing with others about what is relevant  
What kind of English is suitable for which purpose  
Structuring a text: beginning, middle, end  
The language of reporting e.g. according to XYZ  
Working on topic vocabulary

The **Emphasis Handout** was useful for correction work at several stages of writing.

This handout is about the way certain expressions are used in formal English to emphasise. For example, if you write an essay with the following in it “Not only the pupils would be more motivated, they would also be more successful“ I would underline “Not only the pupils would be“ as the construction is not right. So what are these expressions and how do they affect sentence structure.

[[http://www.findyourfeet.de/usr/doc/FyF\\_cm\\_emphasis.pdf](http://www.findyourfeet.de/usr/doc/FyF_cm_emphasis.pdf)].

### **Writing a summary of an editorial**

I sometimes used an editorial, but preferred to use a column. They are similar in nature in that they both put forward a personal opinion on something in the news and in public debate at a particular time, and both require the reader to disentangle facts from opinions, but the one is more chatty and humorous in style than the other. As to topic, I think it should be something the students are familiar with in their own country.

To the questions in the Writer Reader Handout, such as Who am I writing to, What will they know, and Why am I writing, students could obviously answer: I am writing a summary because you told us to. Yes, that is true, but I asked them to imagine the following situation: you are doing an internship in a political research institute and your boss has asked you to summarise the Editorials/comment columns in all the big British Sunday newspapers on one particular date. (The idea came from a student.) This is a realistic task, for which they have the framework in the **Writing Summaries Handout**, p.2:

#### **Topic**

The writer is putting forward his opinion on .....

#### **Argument**

He claims/argues/contends/ that ....

According to the writer ...

#### **Reasons, justification, support**

He points to ...

He points to the fact that ...

He cites findings from ...

He refers to (events, statistics, other people etc.) ...

#### **Conclusion, message**

He concludes that ...

The following is a good example of a useful article, on the topic of immigration: 'Why we should welcome strangers bearing gifts', a column in a

weekly paper. Although the “we” refers to people living in Scotland, and although it was written in 2000 the students soon discover the relevance for contemporary Germany. The article opens as follows:

There is something scary about figures that show a declining population. A falling birth rate, more deaths, an ageing people – they all suggest that there is something rotten in the state of the nation. Last week's statistics indicating that deaths had outnumbered births by more than 5,000 in Scotland last year seemed to reinforce the idea of a draining life force, almost as if we were experiencing a loss of national virility [...].

And concludes:

At a time when our own population is falling we should be welcoming rather than repelling these modern invaders. They are part of our future – and very often the better part.

Linklater, Magnus (2000, July 23). Why we should welcome strangers bearing gifts. *Scotland on Sunday*.

First, tuning the reader in. Since the reader can get lots of clues about the text type and topic from the layout of the article, it is a good idea to put a copy of the bare outline of the article on the board, without the actual text. In this case there is a thick line all the way across the top; the title 'Why we should welcome strangers bearing gifts'; a head and shoulders photo on the left; a subtitle underneath the photo 'On the benefits of immigration'.

You can ask what kind of text it could be, where they would expect to find it in a newspaper. Then ask them to think about the title and what words they might expect to find in the article. This is again an interesting experience for most of the students as they are not used to being asked about their expectations, which are neither right nor wrong and hence cannot be judged. Next they get the article cut up and jumbled for re-assembly. Once they have put it together in what they think is a sensible order they are asked if any of the words they expected are actually in the text.

They then have time to read the complete article and to mine it for vocabulary. I encourage them to read as follows:

Think about the title, subtitle and date  
Read first and last paragraphs  
Scan for anything you expect to find, like “Europe”  
Skim through the whole text  
then read it carefully.

For the mining of vocabulary I give them some ideas of how I would go about organising and connecting words and phrases, using simple visual images such as:

welcoming immigrants:-) → a healthy economy:-)  
a declining population ↓ a rising population ↑  
a spiral of births ↑↑  
a mass influx of foreign labour, a flood of immigrants ↑↑↑

This is much more useful than the usual chronological list of disconnected words.

So what are they going to put into their summary?

First there is a list of statements taken from previous classes' summaries of the article for them to sort into a) factual things b) opinions. This is fun as the list of statements includes: Scotland is experiencing a loss of national virility; Saskia Sassen's study is fascinating; The Scandinavians are icy; Germany experienced an economic boom in the 60s.

Next, they are asked to decide which factual things they personally do not find relevant for the summary.

Then: if you relate facts in your summary, what words are you going to use to introduce them? If you relate opinions in your summary, what words are you going to use to introduce them? This points back to the summary framework above, from the Handout.

The following week each person individually, in turn, is asked to write down on a sheet of paper what they thought the message of the article was, then fold the sheet over so that the next person cannot see what has been written, and then pass it on. In the end we have a concertinaed paper with many different opinions on the topic of the article. This again is an interesting experience for the students, and is followed by further discussion until some kind of agreement on the topic is reached.

The final writing task is not to write their own summary but simply to complete the sentences on page 2 of the Writing Summaries Handout, Writing a summary of an editorial.

Finally, the **Language Correction sheet**, which is symbol marked only, is for the students to work through together. It included the following:

Ws

In Scotland there is a big competition for jobs.

W

The economical development of Scotland.

C

W

He wants to avoid that refugees are sent back to the own country.

Art.

Asp.

Economy in Scotland flourishes.

### **Writing a summary and comment on a documentary film**

The Writing Summaries Handout (part 3) gives my reasons for asking students to write a summary and comment on a documentary film:

As with all summaries you have to understand the point of the 'text'. You have to be able to pick out the main points and leave out the

details. This can be quite difficult with a documentary as often there are many people interviewed, and frequent jumps back and forward in time and place. You might also have to deal with the problem of a variety of accents. Where you are expected to write a summary and a comment you also have to take care to keep your summary separate from your comment.

The questions: Who am I writing to, What will they know, and Why am I writing. This time I suggest they could be writing for themselves, producing a text that they can look back on, and which could serve as a kind of model for future film summaries.

**The task** is actually split into two, in order to reinforce the idea of keeping summary and comment separate. The first part is to write at home a comment on the film i.e. their own personal reaction; the second is to write a summary, in small groups, in class. The guidelines and language for these are in the handout.

I used many different documentaries including very interesting ones on contemporary Germany; the following is an example of what I found particularly good for the purposes of this course.

'In Disgrace' is an episode from the BBC series 'The Secret World of Sex', first broadcast in 1991, and focuses on what happened to young unmarried mothers in Britain before the Second World War. It is composed of archival film material and interviews with several elderly women who relate in detail their own experience. It is the women themselves, usually in close-up, who best convey to the viewer the pain they suffered.

When I first saw this film I thought that I would never use it in a class. It felt too personal, too moving. However, I gradually realised that it was a very good documentary for my Writing class. It puts some distance in terms of both time and place between the students and the issue, but leaves no one unmoved, so they are glad to have the chance to write a personal comment at home to express their feelings. It also has all the "technical" difficulties mentioned in the handout (see above), which makes for interesting group discussions when deciding what is relevant for the summary.

BBC (1991). *The Secret World of Sex: In Disgrace*.

Before viewing, the students are not given the title or date of the film. To get their imagination working and gradually tune them in to the general topic I give them a list of key words or phrases in the order in which they occur in the film:

to have a baby out of wedlock  
to have an illegitimate child  
to be pregnant  
to get a good hiding  
Epsom salts  
[...]  
to be petrified  
I was treated prettily shabbily

the labour ward  
I'll do myself in

Their task is to talk through these words, look up what they do not know, and then we talk about them. This vocabulary work can be continued later outside class by re-organising the words in the list into meaningful bundles.

Based on the list of words, they are asked what they think the topic is and the setting i.e. the where and when. There were always lots of very different ideas, especially about the where and when.

It is good if the class can have two opportunities to watch the film, once in class together for first impressions, and again outside class for taking notes. After watching the film their task, with the help of the Writing Summaries Handout, is to write their own personal comment on the documentary and hand it in.

**Language Correction sheet.** This is based on previous classes' mistakes. But first, at the top there is a little text in "German" for them to think about:

Ich bin ein englisch schuler. Ich habe gelernt deutsch für einige monat. Wenn ich kann mer deutsch ich wolle gehen zu Deutschland. Viele Leute in deutschland lernt englisch.

Everyone can understand it, but it is still beginners level German. What kind of mistakes have been made? What kind of things will this writer have to learn? From thinking about this, the students realise that they sometimes make the same type of mistakes in English: words including modals, spelling, word order, tense, noun-verb agreement, singular/plural forms.

By this time the students are beginning to see what has gone wrong on the Language Correction sheets, without me having to symbol mark; underlining is enough. Sometimes they realise they have seen that mistake before and now know how to correct it without the use of any tools. That is progress! For example, \*The ladies felt like being punished is an echo of \*I felt like being alone in this chaos (from the very first Language Correction sheet).

One of the interviewed women tells that ...  
Only when the woman was old she dared to tell her son the truth  
I missed statistics  
In former times one was discriminated if she ....  
Interviews shall make the women's situation clear  
The ladies felt like being punished  
They have made a terrible experience as they were young  
The biggest mistake made the parents  
[...].

With the help of the Writing Summaries Handout, the **Emphasis Handout**, and the dictionary most of the mistakes on the Language Correction sheet can be corrected. The rest require a knowledge of tense and aspect that some bring to class. This is the moment when students who have attended a

Grammar class see that it was worth it:-) and the others realise that they really should attend one.

At the end of the correction sheet there is, of course, again the question: And what are you going to do with this sheet now?

They are now ready to begin discussing the film in small groups in order to decide what they would put into their summary, using the guidelines given in the handout. The first thing to do is to agree on what to put into their brief introductory paragraph saying what the film is about. This generates a lot of discussion, as in the summary of the newspaper article.

My next question: how will you structure the rest of the summary? Since it is not the names of the women or their exact dates of birth which are important they can be left out. I suggest they focus on what happened to the women, and what they have in common. Discussion led to:

- How the women became pregnant
- What happened to them when the pregnancy was discovered
- What happened to them during the pregnancy
- The birth of the child
- What happened to mother and child after the birth.

They now have a framework or structure for their summary and can talk about which facts and examples they want to put in. Here there is plenty room for variety and differences of opinion. This task is completed outside class, in pairs, groups or individually, as the students choose.

One of the interesting things to come out of the documentary summaries is a tendency to make wild generalisations such as:

- Many women had to marry an older man in order to be allowed to keep the child.
- There was no sex education at that time.

After thought and discussion we could turn these into:

- One of the women interviewed was practically forced to marry an older man so that she could keep her child.
- None of the women interviewed seemed to know anything at that time about sex and the consequences.

When the students get their marked work back they have a complete summary and comment on a documentary film. They can use this as a guideline for making notes for their own future data bank of films.

I always tried to provide something in print on the same topic as the documentary, in this case a copy of a short report 'Rape, Late 1930s', by Isa Porte, in Goring (2007). Here they could find not only the same ideas but also some of the same language as in the film. I also gave suggestions for similar

topics in contemporary fiction. e.g. *The Vanishing Act of Esme Lennox*. Goring, Rosemary (Ed.) (2007). *Scotland: The Autobiography. 2,000 years of Scottish history by those who saw it happen*. London: Viking.  
O'Farrell, Maggie (2006). *The Vanishing Act of Esme Lennox*. London: Headline Review.

We also talk about German society, what they know themselves, what they know from parents and grandparents, and about why and how a society changes or is forced to change, and not just with regard to the topic in the film. In this way we expand on the topic.

## Writing an essay

At this stage the students are now well equipped to write a short coherent text in response to a specific question.

Materials required: Dictionary

FyF: Essay Writing, Punctuation

[[http://www.findyourfeet.de/usr/doc/FyF\\_cm\\_essaywriting.pdf](http://www.findyourfeet.de/usr/doc/FyF_cm_essaywriting.pdf)].

[[http://www.findyourfeet.de/usr/doc/FyF\\_cm\\_punctuation.pdf](http://www.findyourfeet.de/usr/doc/FyF_cm_punctuation.pdf)].

The Essay Writing Handout contains tips for organising your ideas and actually writing an essay.

- (1) Information on the structure of an essay
- (2) Tips for planning your essay
- (3) More information on paragraphs
- (4) Some useful language

[[http://www.findyourfeet.de/usr/doc/FyF\\_cm\\_essaywriting.pdf](http://www.findyourfeet.de/usr/doc/FyF_cm_essaywriting.pdf)].

The **Essay Writing Handout** makes it clear that in this class an essay simply means a short coherent text, not a researched and referenced term paper. The task is to put your ideas across to your reader clearly:

The key to writing a clear text is forcing yourself to decide what your point, argument, thesis is, before you start writing. Another way of saying this is: You should organise your thoughts before you start to write.

Integrating people from other countries into Germany was a good topic, as every student has something to say about it. This was true over a period of many years, long before it came to dominate the news with reference to refugees from the Middle East.

We began in class with a set of questions to be tackled in small groups, not necessarily all the questions and not necessarily in the order given,

- What does integration mean?
- What is German culture?
- What is the German way of life?
- How can you see whether a person is integrated or not?
- Can people be taught/forced to integrate?
- Should there be laws on integration?
- Is German citizenship important?

The discussions were always interesting, intense, sometimes funny, heated – never dispirited or dull. They also brought up a lot of useful language, so I could put correct forms on the board for them while they were talking. For example: culture, German culture, citizenship, German citizenship, as these have generic reference and are therefore expressed with zero article in English. This is in contrast to German, or French or Italian which use the definite article.

**Their task** is to write an essay at home on the topic of integrating people from other countries, and bring it with them to class, as they will have the opportunity to do some work on it before handing it in.

**The essay question:**

If you were in charge of integration policy in Germany, what would your top priorities be? Give reasons.

**The essay structure:**

**A brief introductory paragraph:**

If I were in charge of integration policy in Germany, I would have X top priorities: mmmm, mmmmm and mmmmmmmmm.

**One paragraph for each top priority.** Tell me what you would actually do and why:

e.g. Firstly, mmmmm..... I would .....

e.g. My second priority is ..... I would .....

e.g. Thirdly, I would focus on ..... I would ....

**A brief concluding paragraph:**

To sum up, .....

The reason for the above very simplistic looking structure and signposting language for their first essay is that if the students use this, they can be sure that the reader will follow their argumentation. With this framework they can communicate their basic ideas successfully, no matter how weak the English is. For some students, however, this framework is hard to accept, understandably so. They wish to be more adventurous, especially with the

signposting language. But replacing “To sum up, ...”, for example, which is correct and appropriate English, by expressions such as “\*As a result I want to pronounce that ...”, just does not work. I would keep on encouraging learners to use this framework. Once they have written an essay like this, which is also the model for their in-class essay at the end of term, they can go on to be more individualistic later.

**Comment sheet.** In addition to marking each individual essay, I usually wrote a Comment sheet, which we read through and talked about the following week. This gave me the chance to comment on the topic, and on language that several people seemed to have difficulty with. I also added some useful language e.g.

Immigrants should have a basic knowledge of German, both spoken and written.  
They should eventually have a good command of the language, both spoken and written.

One point which always needs to be focussed on is the tendency to write what sounds like bureaucratic English, e.g.

“The facilitation of the acquisition of the language of the host country should be supported”.

This is impersonal and does not say who does what. With the help of practice examples taken from the Plain English campaign and the question 'Who does what?' we were able to transform the above into “I would help immigrants learn German”. After all, the task was not to summarise the situation of immigrants in Germany at the time, but to make concrete suggestions.

A practice example:

**Before**

High quality learning environments are a necessary precondition for facilitation and enhancement of the ongoing learning process.

**After**

Children need good schools if they are to learn properly.

[<http://www.plainenglish.co.uk/campaigning/examples/before-and-after.html>].

Here it is interesting to look at attempts made in Germany to turn bureaucratic non-sense into comprehensible reader-friendly language. Examples: Beger, Julian (2010, 9 February). Schluss mit Beamtendeutsch. *Südkurier*. Beber, Frank von (2008, 28 May). Jetzt heißt's Amtsdeutsch a.D. *Badische Zeitung*.

We also made use of the **Punctuation Handout** to correct some punctuation errors e.g. \*I think, that it would be good if (.....), and to put across the message that commas have meaning in English so they cannot be used the way German uses them.

This handout has a set of punctuation tasks and the right answers. There are no explanations here of rules as we work these out in class together. They are simple and logical and not difficult to learn. Part 1: four tasks. Part 2: the right answers [...].

[[http://www.findyourfeet.de/usr/doc/FyF\\_cm\\_punctuation.pdf](http://www.findyourfeet.de/usr/doc/FyF_cm_punctuation.pdf)].

Talking through the **Comment sheet** is a good opportunity to encourage the students to go on thinking e.g. about the German culture that some of them want immigrants to adopt, and about who they are referring to in their essays when they write “we”, “they”. Also about the tendency with some writers to be very radical e.g. if an immigrant does not pass a particular language test they should be deported. For me as the reader of their work it is an opportunity to add new perspectives. This was part of my job as teacher. However, I need to add here that there were always remarkable essays with really interesting ideas. They would have deserved lots more discussion, and should have been put into practice in the real world.

As with the documentary film, I provided an article on the same topic as the essay. In this case a good example was an article on immigrants in Germany. It begins:

A top Conservative from Chancellor Angela Merkel's party warned immigrants yesterday they must adapt to the German way of life or face 'consequences'.

Barkin, Noah (2008, 4 January). Immigrant crime debate fuelled by OAP attack. *Scotsman*.

It has lots of useful language e.g “people with an immigrant background”, “live in tight, isolated communities”. The students always found it interesting to read about their own country in English. Being familiar with the topic makes it easier for them to learn the correct English to talk about it. This follows the principle of “from the familiar to the new”.

### **Writing a formal letter**

Materials required: Dictionary

FyF: Formal Letters

This handout has some basics for writing formal letters and two examples. Please note that the letters on this handout are only rough guidelines with useful and polite expressions. Every letter should be individual and tailored to the recipient (the person you are writing to!).

[[http://www.findyourfeet.de/usr/doc/FyF\\_ha\\_formalletter.pdf](http://www.findyourfeet.de/usr/doc/FyF_ha_formalletter.pdf)].

Writing a formal letter is only touched on briefly.

First we make a list of the things which appear in a German formal letter: writer's name, address, salutation, date, etc. Then they are asked to place all these things on a sheet of paper the way they would do it in German. (Lots of discussion.)

Next we look at a formal letter in the **Formal Letters Handout**, and students are asked to identify differences between English and German layout. They are always surprised. This is a good occasion to talk about differences in everyday things where they are totally unexpected. Multiplication and division in basic school arithmetic, or knitting, were some of my experiences. Usually someone has an anecdote to tell.

However, I relativise the importance of getting the layout correct; after all, this differs from country to country and will continue to change, or as some would argue, even become obsolete. Instead, I stress the importance of being polite i.e. requesting, not demanding, and addressing the recipient respectfully. Even though letters from a British university welcoming new students to induction week for example, will address them by their first name - greatly to the surprise of the class, this informality should not be used by the student.

As I always tried to make connections between topics, we returned to the issue of integration when I read them the opening lines of a letter from Scotland. It was written in response to a letter I wrote to the editor (Dear Sir) of a local Scottish newspaper, inquiring if anyone could give me (Fiona Ross) information about a particular World War II POW (prisoner of war) camp:

Dear Fiona,

I hope you don't mind if I address you like that. As you know in Scotland we are less formal or stiff as perhaps the Germans are [...].

Those words are rather a shock. But the reason why I used this letter is that it was written by a German who had been a POW in Scotland, and settled down and stayed there. How lovely when “we” means everyone living in a country, regardless of their nationality or origins.

### **Writing a book summary and comment in class**

Materials required: Dictionary

FyF: Writing Summaries

[[http://www.findyourfeet.de/usr/doc/FyF\\_cm\\_writingsummary.pdf](http://www.findyourfeet.de/usr/doc/FyF_cm_writingsummary.pdf)].

Several weeks in advance the students are told that they will be writing a book summary and comment in class, using the Writing Summaries Handout (part 4). They are asked to choose a book, contemporary fiction, which they found interesting. Excluded are books from university seminars. It could be something they read recently, or as a child, something in English or German

or any language they can read and feel able to write about in English. Writing a longish text within ninety minutes is quite a challenge, and prepares the students for writing the end-of-term essay in class. This work is marked and commented by me.

An interesting end-of term task was sharing information on the book they had written about. With a list of the titles they had chosen on the board or overhead, everyone had the chance to choose one and ask about it. The person who wrote about the book was expected to say very briefly, in only a couple of sentences, what it was about and why they chose it. This was more practice in summarising, with the bonus that all of us got to find out about new books to read.

### **Writing an essay in class**

This is their end-of-term in-class assignment. They have two full hours to write a short clear and coherent answer to a question. They are expected to use their dictionaries, and are free to use any of the handouts if they feel it will help. I always chose topics to reflect the interests of the students in my class at the time and which did not require any specialist knowledge. I also always asked a clear question (instead of asking them to “Discuss”) so that they would find it easier to react and write a clear answer. They wrote me some very interesting answers.

They are a maximum of three questions to choose from. Those below are typical of the kind which always worked well:

2004 was The Year of Sport, 2009 was The Year of Intercultural Dialogue, (etc.). What would you make 20xx the Year of, and why?

Many schools in Germany are now changing to having morning **and** afternoon school. Some people see this as just extra hours to fill with teaching more of the same old thing, but others see it as a wonderful opportunity for change. What would you do to make optimal use of the school day? Give reasons.

If you could change anything you wanted in Germany today, what would your top priorities be and why?

The Age of Exploration, The Flower Power Era, The Information Age - these are labels that have been attached to certain times. What label would you give the age you feel you are living in, and why?

As far as marking, evaluating and grading students' work is concerned I would like only to say the following. Every piece of work the students handed in was read carefully and marked in such a way that they could see clearly where their weaknesses were, in the two main areas: language, and text structure. Sometimes I used the question sheet on page 3 of the Writer Reader Handout, and filled it in for them:

Once you have written your text, put it aside for a while, then try to look at it as the READER and answer the following questions (honestly!): Yes No

Do you feel you have understood what the writer wanted to say?

Does the text have a conceptual beginning, middle and end [...]

[[http://www.findyourfeet.de/usr/doc/FyF\\_cm\\_writerreader.pdf](http://www.findyourfeet.de/usr/doc/FyF_cm_writerreader.pdf)].

By the end of the term most students were able to write a well structured short essay. The more accurate the language, the better the grade. Accuracy combined with breadth of language, something not really expected at this level, would earn a top grade. Those who did not answer the question and/or did not show a grasp of basic English grammar and vocabulary were given the opportunity to attend another Writing class at the same level, with a colleague.

### **Bringing the class to a satisfying close**

Thinking about the characteristics of different text types.

I handed out a sheet with columns on it length-wise, the columns headed: CV, Summary, Summary and comment, Essay, Term paper. Their task was to consult with neighbours as usual and enter in the first four columns the typical characteristics of each text type. We checked these through together, noting similarities and differences. Then they thought about the characteristics of the text type Term paper, which we obviously had not done in class. In the end they could see how much of what they had learned in this class could be carried over to writing a Term paper e.g. be relevant, keep summary and comment separate, structure carefully, use formal style. Further information, including the differences between Essay and Term Paper, can be found in the

#### **Writing a Term Paper Handout:**

This handout contains tips for organising your ideas and actually writing a term paper (Hausarbeit). Although it was written for students of English writing a term paper on Area Studies, Literature or Linguistics, it is addressed to students of all Departments and subjects who need to write a term paper in English.

- (1) Information on the structure of a term paper
- (2) Tips for planning your term paper
- (3) More information on paragraphs
- (4) Using clear English
- (5) Some more useful language
- (6) More tips for your written paper
- (7) Information on how to acknowledge your sources
- (8) How to write your bibliography
- (9) A final word

[[http://www.findyourfeet.de/usr/doc/FyF\\_ha\\_termpaper.pdf](http://www.findyourfeet.de/usr/doc/FyF_ha_termpaper.pdf)].

### **Lastly, bringing the class to a good-fun end**

The very last twenty minutes or so of class time were used to give the students the chance to be creative, fast, and to voice their frustrations or whatever, by writing a few lines of poetry about their experience in the class. They were by this time so used to sharing their ideas that they always did this by choice with a partner or in a small group; they wrote quickly on an overhead and then read their poems out. Here is only one:

About writing  
Keep it relevant, keep it clear  
Look for paragraphs and don't fear  
A logical structure in your writing,  
Junk and non-sense is what you're fighting.

The poems were good-humoured and wise, but probably only make sense to those who have been in the class. I wrote them all up later and sent them to everyone in the class, to enjoy, sometimes adding a poem of my own, dedicated to them.

Of course there are also more traditional ways of getting feedback e.g. an evaluation sheet, preferably one which is short, uncomplicated, and gives the students the chance to offer their own ideas. Some example questions are below; scales were provided from 'really interesting' to 'dead boring', or 'a lot' to 'very little', or 'Yes', 'Partially', 'No'. The questions you put into an evaluation sheet should be those that you really want to find out about.

How would you rate this course from really interesting to dead boring?  
How much do you feel you have learnt?  
Be honest! How much effort did you put into this course?  
Given the aims of this course (Please read the course description carefully): Do you think we/you reached them?  
What would you definitely have liked more/less of?  
Any other comments on this course?

## **COURSE DESCRIPTION**

### **Writing Skills: Discussion and Essay Writing**

Information on the course for participants, given to the students at the first meeting of class and talked through in detail:

Target group: This course is intended for students in higher semesters and builds on the foundations laid in Basic Academic Writing classes for producing clear and coherent texts.

Course aims: The aim is to enable students to write well organised essays in good English on a wide variety of topics. One focus will be on organising ideas clearly; the other will be on developing accuracy of language. All writing will be based on a wide variety of interesting topics, which will be introduced by means of short texts and videos, and discussed in class as a preparation for the actual writing. Participants will prepare and introduce some of the topics themselves. Writing assignments will take the form of one-paragraph statements of opinion and complete structured essays. There will also be tutorials where students can get individual feedback on their work and help with solving problems.

Materials: Participants are expected to bring their Cobuild Advanced Learners Dictionary (or similar) with them regularly, and print off all the Writing files in [www.Findyourfeet.de] if not already done.

Credits: To gain credits regular active participation is required, regular completion of assignments, including preparation and presentation of a topic, portfolio, final essay test.

Please note that regular completion of assignments really means regular and spread over the whole term. Writing is taught and practised in this class as a process of thinking, structuring your thoughts, drafting, (consulting your classmates), correcting your work and handing it in. There is no way you can just hand in a bundle of writing at the end of semester. The writing, drafting, correcting has to be done regularly.

Sometimes we will have correction work sessions in class; at other times you do the correction work at home. Where necessary you are expected to come to me individually in my tutorial and talk through your work. By the end of term you have to be in possession of a portfolio documenting your progress.

Some comments on the course description:

As far as tutorials are concerned, I found them absolutely necessary at all levels of Writing Skills. In class we could work together on issues affecting most of the students; where students have a major problem, however, either with language or with organising their thoughts, this is best done in a tutorial. Not necessarily individually, as sometimes tutorials with two students worked very well, with one helping the other.

Students are also encouraged to get contact details of neighbours, as in the lower-level Writing Skills class.

## Step by step through the course:

### Your experience of studying English at university

Materials required: Dictionary

FyF: Using Cobuild 02, Writer Reader Handout; CV Handout; Emphasis Handout

[[http://www.findyourfeet.de/usr/doc/FyF\\_cm\\_writerreader.pdf](http://www.findyourfeet.de/usr/doc/FyF_cm_writerreader.pdf)].

[[http://www.findyourfeet.de/usr/doc/FyF\\_ha\\_cv.pdf](http://www.findyourfeet.de/usr/doc/FyF_ha_cv.pdf)].

[[http://www.findyourfeet.de/usr/doc/FyF\\_cm\\_emphasis.pdf](http://www.findyourfeet.de/usr/doc/FyF_cm_emphasis.pdf)].

To get an idea of their ability to write I ask them to write me a couple of paragraphs about their experience of studying English, and their other subject if they wish: what they have enjoyed, what they have not enjoyed, and what they hope for in the rest of their course of studies. It is a really good discussion topic, but here I use it to get them to write.

I find this useful as it lets me see if they actually are effective users of the dictionary if they have one with them, what grammar weaknesses they have, if they can paragraph, and if they have a grasp of the kind of vocabulary needed to talk about university life in English. In fact, since much of their university life takes place in German, students generally find it difficult to express in English ideas connected to university, education in general, studying, studying English, teaching English. This first text is a good opportunity to fill that gap.

**Using Cobuild** (as in Writing Skills 1). This task is absolutely necessary for those who have not done any similar dictionary work before, and a useful follow-up for those who have.

This time there is a slightly different version of the handout with items such as:

a) Which is correct? Both? One? Neither?

This topic is to a high extent interesting.

This topic is highly interesting.

b) Which of these means leaving Konstanz University:

I would like to change the university

I would like to change university

I would like to change universities

c) If your bus to the university has just been later for the fifth day running, would you probably be feeling

jumpy?

irritated?

nervous?

[...]

In the following week we look at my system of marking in the **Writer Reader Handout** and then work on a **Language Correction sheet** based on their writing about studying. A better alternative is to use a sheet from a previous class, as the mistakes are always the same, and no one feels uncomfortable.

Typical mistakes are:

In the UK a course of studies is organised much stricter.  
I liked most about my studies that I could study quite relaxed.  
I decided to change my university.  
Only now, in the last semester, I feel able to ...  
Opening my horizon is something I don't want to miss.  
There is no recipe to pass the exam well.  
At the end you have to write a test about all topics.  
Government wants students to waste no time with the gaining of knowledge that is requested by economy.  
Although, it was and is a great time.  
In literature classes we discuss scientific issues.  
It was analysed under the aspect of gender.  
The film was discussed very controversially.  
[...].

On the sheet these were ordered systematically, in categories such as Word(s), Constructions, Collocations, Article (countability and the noun; specific/generic reference), Style mixes, Punctuation, Word order, Tense and Aspect, so that the students can become aware of the kinds of errors they make themselves, and gradually learn to correct them, with the help of the dictionary and the various Handouts.

As in Writing Skills 1, the question at the bottom of the page is:

So what are you going to do with this sheet now???

I encourage the students to use the same technique as in the lower level class. If they take this advice they soon have a store of correct and real English which is relevant for this class and for their whole course of studies.

### **Some more good topics**

At the start of the course I would choose one or two topics that I know from experience to be interesting and relevant for the students and lead to good writing, and introduce them in such a way that the students can acquire the language they need to engage with the topic. The following are examples. Legalising Cannabis; Remembering the past; Learning another language.

### **Legalising Cannabis**

This topic is a good starter. The article chosen below is interesting, personal and direct. The way we worked on it serves as a good example of how students can go about the task of reading articles, and collecting and acquiring useful vocabulary.

MacLeod, Murdo (2002, 7 July). MS victim faces jail over cannabis. *Scotland on Sunday*.

First the students get an A3 sheet with a photocopy of the complete article including a photograph of the person reported on, in her kitchen with her cannabis biscuits. The only change I make is that I blank out some very interesting words. Once we have skimmed through the text, the students have the task of trying to imagine what kind of word could fit into the gaps, from the point of view of both meaning and grammar.

The subtitle is:

“..... after woman is accused of supplying drug-laced chocolates.” (The missing word is “outcry”.)

The text begins:

“A wheelchair-using multiple sclerosis sufferer is facing a year in prison following ..... she baked cannabis-laced chocolates and sent them to fellow MS patients.” (The missing word is “allegations”.)

They always enjoy this and have lots of ideas about “good” words. When we check through this later, I try to distinguish clearly between “good idea, right meaning, but not exactly the word in the original” or “not the right meaning, look again at the context” or “not grammatically correct, look again at the context”.

We then look for word fields in the text and come up with medical, legal, drugs, political, public debate, emotions, and so on. At home they are expected to collect vocabulary from the text in organized word fields. By organized I mean for example that the several words for negative emotions (distressed, perplexed, in turmoil etc.) could be organized in terms of strength or intensity; legal terms could be organized in such a way that they follow the sequence of events in legal proceedings: e.g. to appear in court → a hearing → a trial → to be convicted of something.

Finally, their short written task is to write a one-paragraph answer to the following:

Would you make cannabis freely available? Give one or two reasons.

I encourage them to use the following:

I would definitely (not) make cannabis freely available. Anyone (no one) should be able to ..... The reason for this is .....

Anyone interested could follow up the sad story of the woman in the article, and the changes in the law, as it developed over the years.

From their written work I sometimes created additional language tasks e.g.

Cannabis. See if you can get the tense right!

In the Netherlands cannabis ..... (be legalised) so nobody can be prosecuted.  
Opponents of legalisation claim that if the government legalises cannabis, it ..... (be) difficult to know how much is used.  
These regulations must be very strict because otherwise many people ..... (become) addicted.  
There is also the risk that people .....(consider) other drugs “soft” too.

NB: These only make sense in the context!

## Remembering the past

At first sight this topic may well seem totally unsuited to a writing class. In fact, however, topics which are difficult, controversial, or sensitive can be the source of excellent writing, provided they are approached suitably.

The general issue in this topic is how we as individuals/nations remember or “forget” dark chapters of our past. The focus is on Germany during the Nazi era, and quite specifically the deportation of people, especially children, by rail, to the concentration camps. The particular instances of remembering discussed here are the exhibition of pictures in German railway stations, and the Train of Commemoration also known as the Memory Train, between 2006 and 2008, both of which were very controversial at that time. The Train of Commemoration made a stop in Konstanz as it travelled across Germany.

Although the focus is on Germany, the topic can easily be widened for discussion in accordance with students' interests. For example, dealing with the legacy of the Franco regime in Spain, or Britain's colonial past.

In 2014 there was a very interesting debate in Britain on the value of different ways of remembering the First World War.

We began with talking about how events or people are generally commemorated: statues, plaques, public holidays, street names etc. Next we focussed on Germany with material on the two ways of commemorating the deportations mentioned above.

Spiegel.de and DW-World.de provided many very useful articles in English, for example:

### **Travelling Holocaust Exhibition. Memory Train to Auschwitz.**

A unique traveling Holocaust exhibition sets off on a six-month journey Friday. The 'Train of Commemoration,' which is dedicated to the Nazi deportation of children and young people, will visit 30 cities between Frankfurt and its final destination of Auschwitz.

A unique traveling train-mounted Holocaust exhibition will leave Frankfurt railway station Friday and begin its six-month-long journey through Germany to Auschwitz in Poland. The exhibit commemorates the fate of the estimated 1.5 million children and youth who were rounded up between 1940 and 1944 and

transported by the former Reichsbahn to the concentration camps [...].

Travelling Holocaust Exhibition. Memory Train to Auschwitz. Spiegel online. 09.11. 2007.

[<http://www.spiegel.de/international/germany/traveling-holocaust-exhibition-memory-train-to-auschwitz-a-516430.html>].

### **German Rail Wants to Keep Holocaust Exhibition Out of Stations**

Pictures of Jewish children deported from France to German concentration camps were displayed in French train stations for two years. Now, German rail wants to block the exhibition from reaching stations in Germany.

...

More than 60 years after the deportations, Beate Klarsfeld and her husband Serge Klarsfeld, president of the French organization "Sons and Daughters of the Deported Jews in France," feel Deutsche Bahn should pay tribute to these young Holocaust victims. They want to display 150 photographs of the deported German and Austrian children in German train stations. But Deutsche Bahn has refused their request, citing security issues and a lack of funds [...].

[<http://www.dw.com/en/german-rail-wants-to-keep-holocaust-exhibition-out-of-stations/a-1953848>] 04.04.2006.

I also provided leaflets in German from the Memory Train, as it stood in Konstanz for some days.

The students' task was to read through the materials, picking out details of both the photo exhibition and the train, including arguments for and against each, so that everyone in the class had a clear idea of both ways of remembering.

We did vocabulary work on the texts, collecting words in fields such as: Remembering/Not remembering; Exhibitions; Reactions and organizing vocabulary within these fields.

The writing task for outside of class was not a long discursive essay on the topic of remembering, but to make a brief one-paragraph statement in answer to the following question:

Would you be in favour of the photo exhibition at railway stations. Give reasons.

As the focus of discussion is on a particular way of remembering, and specifically the reactions of one institution they are all familiar with, namely German Rail, the students became very involved in the topic, without feeling personally "attacked" or under scrutiny as Germans. This produces wonderful,

memorable writing. Their use of language was usually fairly accurate as they realised that if they read carefully they could find in the texts themselves most of the language needed, even for the very German expression 'Eine Auseinandersetzung mit der Vergangenheit'.

## Learning another language

Materials required:

FyF: Essay Writing, Logical Links, Emphasis, Punctuation

[[http://www.findyourfeet.de/usr/doc/FyF\\_cm\\_essaywriting.pdf](http://www.findyourfeet.de/usr/doc/FyF_cm_essaywriting.pdf)].

[[http://www.findyourfeet.de/usr/doc/FyF\\_cm\\_logicallinks.pdf](http://www.findyourfeet.de/usr/doc/FyF_cm_logicallinks.pdf)].

[[http://www.findyourfeet.de/usr/doc/FyF\\_cm\\_emphasis.pdf](http://www.findyourfeet.de/usr/doc/FyF_cm_emphasis.pdf)].

[[http://www.findyourfeet.de/usr/doc/FyF\\_cm\\_punctuation.pdf](http://www.findyourfeet.de/usr/doc/FyF_cm_punctuation.pdf)].

This topic is clearly relevant for all the students as they will be engaged in this for the whole of their lives, and particularly useful for future teachers. It is easy to find good materials on it, both in print and film.

Example materials:

Looking at Immersion schooling is a good way in to the topic of language learning. Most students are not familiar with the concept and find it intriguingly different from their own experience. I began with a jumbled newspaper article on Gaelic-medium schools in Scotland, for them to re-assemble, in small groups, and give a title to. Some of their ideas for titles were better than the original. It is a good layman's introduction to immersion schooling, beginning:

Children as young as five should be taught in French or German for large periods of their school day, according to an expert group set up to improve Scotland's woeful record in foreign languages.

Each student then gets a copy of the complete article to read, and a very brief summary with gaps at the end for them to fill in. The summary highlights the pros and cons of immersion teaching.

Fraser, Stephen (2000, 10 December). Accent on foreign language drive for classrooms. *Scotland on Sunday*.

Next we watch a BBC video from the archives 'A child's guide to languages', 1983, which has some very interesting things to say about immersion teaching as practised in Canada. I found that using older film materials can be very useful as students who know little about the topic can learn something, and students who know a lot already can comment on what has changed and developed in the meantime. The language used remains the same. This is an excellent starting point for a brief discussion of the typical language learning situation in a German school. Language-wise it is also useful as even students who will one day be teachers themselves struggle to find the English words for talking about language learning and teaching.

BBC (1983, 31 October). *A Child's Guide to Languages: Teaching a Second Language*.

After working our way through the **Essay Writing Handout**, the task is to write an essay on the following topic:

If you had a free hand to change any aspect of the teaching of English at German schools – the what, the when, the how – what would your top priorities be? Give reasons for your choices.

The essays produced were always very interesting and provided a good opportunity for me to write a comment sheet on the content and add useful language. As in the lower level Writing course, one point which always needs to be focussed on is the students' tendency to write what sounds like bureaucratic English. Some examples:

With the introduction of English at Primary School an important step has been taken in order to achieve a better education in English for children and to support children's learning ability even more.

Last but not least one could teach other subjects like geography, biology or history in English and by doing so offer more possibilities for the pupils to hear and to speak English.

Practice examples from the Plain English campaign and the question 'Who does what?' are again useful here. Students enjoy the challenge of turning their own bureaucratic English into something personal, clear and direct. [<http://www.plainenglish.co.uk/campaigning/examples/before-and-after.html>].

**Comment sheets.** Any Comment sheets I produced were read through and talked about in class. They were intended to do several things.

:To encourage the students by being positive e.g.

There was LOTS of good English in your essays - well done - but here are some suggestion for making it better still [...] I enjoyed reading all your work. Why don't you share it with each other? I got the message of everyone's essay, and I can see more clearly now what you still have to learn. What is really important is that each of you individually can see what you can do to improve.

:To provide further thoughts and information, perhaps even new perspectives on the topic.

:To provide more correct and appropriate English.

### **Students' topics**

The next stage in the course is for students to decide on a topic they would like to discuss in class, and of course write about. I encourage them to do this in pairs. Some students already have a topic in mind and then simply search for a variety of articles on it so that they can present a range of arguments;

others need a little help from my archive of topics and materials. Everyone is required to use the following handout to help them prepare their topic for class:

### **Writing Skills. Preparing and Presenting a Topic**

The purpose of the handout is to make sure the class has both the information and the language they need to discuss the topic in a serious way. Your handout, which will be distributed in class, should have the following things:

We chose the general topic area .....  
and we looked at .....in particular.

The issues involved seemed to be things like .....  
(e.g. whether X should be Yed or not; if it is better for ..... or not)

We found the following arguments:  
X should be done because .....  
Y should not be done because .....

What we would like to discuss is .....

Some useful vocabulary: .....

Writing task question: .....

The topics chosen were very interesting and challenging for everyone, e.g. China's one-child policy, punishing athletes who use performance-enhancing drugs, assisted suicide, social networks, fertility drugs, religious instruction in schools, binge-drinking, pop stars as role models, US Presidential elections, cyber mobbing, live coverage of birth and death, arms sales and gun laws.

**Tutorials** are important, to discuss the topic with the students “presenting” and to check their handouts. For some students choosing useful vocabulary and laying it out in a meaningful way is very difficult – if they have not understood the work we have done on vocabulary in context up to then.

After every class discussion of a topic chosen by the students I wrote up a **Language Correction sheet**, but concentrated on giving them correct language. For example, if it is necessary to write down any mistakes, this can be done in tiny print: the son cares of the parents; the correct form was written in large bold type: **the son takes care of his parents.**

### **More language work**

Apart from the language in specific topics I also fitted in some more general correction work e.g. working against students' quite natural tendency to take

chunks of German and translate them word for word into English in their essays. The tasks below are quite a challenge, even for students at this level after two or three years of English at university. Some are talented, and have acquired a solid 'databank' of English while abroad; others, though, are still struggling as outside the language class they are exposed to quite a lot of German-English at the university.

(1) Here it is easy for German speakers to laugh because they can see that the English speaker has translated almost word for word from English. Their task is to turn the English-German into real German.

English → **English-German** → **German**

In seiner Meinung es ist ein dringender Bedarf für Aktion.

In der geheizten Debatte er machte eine beissende Attacke auf seinen Opponenten.

(2) The next task is to turn German-English (taken from students' writing) into real English. This is not so easy as they first have to accept that the language here is German-English, and not English. They can then use their knowledge and the tools available to transform this little by little into real English.

German → **German-English** → **English**

This is in a high degree interesting, it may not be neglected.

There is much foreigner hostility in Germany.

Only since the last three years German politicians try to (.....)

### **More essays**

In between topics with short-answer questions, the students have the opportunity to write full essays, at least one in class, and one at home. The essay topics for this, as in the end-of-term essay in class, develop out of what I have learned about the students' interests.

Examples:

Increasingly poor voter turnout at elections, general political apathy – would more teaching of Politics at school be the remedy for these ills? Give reasons to support your answer.

Some people argue that it is quite simply ridiculous for war criminals to be brought to trial. They should be shot on the spot, is their point of view. How do you stand on this, and why?

“Panic is the terrorists' most powerful weapon.” To what extent, in your opinion, do newspapers and television contribute to panic in the general population? Give reasons for your opinions.

Chancellor Angela Merkel is widely quoted as having said that Germany's attempt to create a multicultural society “had failed, and failed utterly”. Would you agree with this evaluation, and how do you see the way forward? Give reasons.

It has been suggested that the amount of English teaching in German schools should be reduced to make room for children to acquire a basic competence in several languages. Would you support this idea? For what reasons?

The Catholic Church has a clear official position on a variety of issues, for example contraception, abortion, same-sex marriages, and gender equality. Which of these issues are particularly important for you, and how do you feel about them?

For the in-class essay at the end of term, for which they have a good two hours, students are given a couple of choices and reminded: “Don't forget to organise your ideas before you start writing, and do leave yourselves time to check your text before you hand it in.”

With students who faced a serious essay exam at the end of their degree course, it was worthwhile spending some time on encouraging them to read essay questions carefully so that they can identify the question, and make use of the vocabulary given. One option is to give them practice, in pairs or small groups, with a short list of past essay topics, making sure they understand what they are asked to write about, and secondly, isolating key language they could use in their answer. This helps them cope with panic and blank minds in test or exam situations. The language focus is also really important as sometimes students think the topic is wonderful but fear they do not have the specific language to cope with it; when they learn to read the essay question carefully they will probably realise that the key vocabulary is in the question itself. However, they have to use it accurately i.e. not turn “capital punishment” into \*the capital punishment, for example, or “dual citizenship” into \*the dual citizenship.

Following that, they are asked to each choose from the list one that they could imagine actually answering, think about it, and finally tell each other briefly what points they would make if they had to write an essay on this topic.

### **Bringing the class to a satisfying close**

At the end of term feedback on the class can be given via an Evaluation Sheet. The following is short, uncomplicated, and gives the students the chance to offer their own ideas. Some of the questions are below; scales were provided from 'really interesting' to 'dead boring', or 'a lot' to 'very little', or 'Yes', 'Partially', 'No'.

How would you rate this course from really interesting to dead boring?

How much do you feel you have learnt?

Be honest! How much effort did you put into this course?

Given the aims of this course (Please read the course description carefully): Do you think we/you reached them?

What would you definitely have liked more/less of?

Any other comments on this course?

If you could give first year students of English some advice, what would it be?

It is important, however, that the questions asked should be the ones you really want to get answers to.

And, as with Basic Academic Writing Skills, the students have the opportunity to be creative and write a short poem about the class. This has to be done very quickly, absolutely spontaneously, which is half the fun. I appreciated their poems greatly, and sometimes wrote one dedicated to them.

To give the students the last word, two of their poems can be enjoyed below:

Writing on Tuesdays  
A topic is what you get  
A pen is what it takes,  
Paper, space and thought -  
Logical links.

Introduction  
Paragraphs  
Conclusion

Consistent argumentation  
Heat -  
Top priorities in paragraphs  
Noise -

Pen, paper, space and thoughts  
Sweat - a blank page.

.....

We wrote a lot  
The weather was hot.  
We dreamed us away  
With the sunshine today.  
No matter how much we complained  
Collins had to be our best friend.  
Now we know Collins by heart:  
Nobody answers so smart:-)  
Without Essay Writing the future will be boring,  
So we'll cry every morning.

.....

## Appendix

The extracts chosen for language purposes are all from books (taken from my own shelves) which are themselves good stories well written, each in their own way.

The children's story 'Santa's Toyshop' is excellent in conjunction with the Emphasis Handout for examples of fronted adverbial with question form of the verb:

'Never have I had such fun,' Santa told Mrs. Santa Claus.

It also has good examples of simple past v. present perfect.

Way up north in the land of ice and snow stands a cozy little house. And beside the front door hangs a neat little sign. *S. Claus*, says the sign. Because that is who lives there - Santa Claus. [...] "Never have I had such fun," Santa told Mrs. Santa Claus. "I did as you suggested and stopped at the last house." And he whispered the children's names in her ear. Do you think he might pick your house to stop at this year?

Walt Disney Books (1950). *Santa's Toy Shop*. New York: Golden Press Inc. Also available in a 2005 edition.

The following two extracts are excellent for narrative tenses, and are both stories of adventure in very special locations, well worth reading. The first is non-fiction. It begins:

The telegram arrived at ten-past seven. It was Wednesday, 23 April 1913, and I had finished my evening meal and was settling down with my pipe and the evening paper when the doorbell rang [...]. I cannot remember its exact wording, but I still recall vividly the thrill I felt when I read it. Was I willing to join an Arctic expedition for four years? No salary, but all expenses paid. It was signed 'Stefanson'.

McKinlay, William Laird (2000). *Karluk: A Great Untold Story of Arctic Expedition*. London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson.

The second is fiction for children and young adults and opens with:

If I had not caught a bad cold and developed bronchitis, and if I had not upset the supper try one night in June, I might never have taken the long road from my quiet street in Chelsea to the Isle of Mist in the Hebrides. It happened as simply as that. I suppose it had to happen that way.

McLean, Allan Campbell (1989). *The Hill of the Red Fox*. Edinburgh: Canongate.

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