

**A MOOC REVIEW:**  
***WRITING IN ENGLISH AT UNIVERSITY (WEU)***

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**1. Introduction**

Recent development in MOOCs (Massive Open Online Courses) is one of the most prominent trends of higher education courses online (Baturay, 2015), which promotes learning through flexible participation and open access via web. MOOCs are now being offered by many universities to online learners – including English Language learners – worldwide. A popular MOOC platform – Coursera (n.d.) offers some open access English Language courses – created mainly by reputed universities across the world. Some short and specialization courses are offered for free, but most require a small enrolment fee, with a seven-day free trial. Coursera (n.d.) is currently offering many short and specialization English language courses for communication; career development; business communication; business and entrepreneurship; sales and marketing; grammar and pronunciation; academic purposes; journalism; advance writing; and language teachers. Amongst the courses, I have selected to review *Writing in English at University* (WEU).

**2. Description of the course**

WEU is intended for those who wish to acquire academic writing skills which are essential (Lea & Street, 1998) for effective communication in university studies, professional life and lifelong learning. Specifically, this course has been designed as a resource for university students who are currently involved in writing assignments or degree projects as well as for students who wish to learn about academic writing in order to prepare for future writing for academic purposes. It is argued that many international university students are yet to develop the academic writing in English skills in English speaking universities but those are teachable (Fell & Lukianova, 2015).

WEU is a four-week online course with approximately four hours of study commitment every week. WEU requires registration to commence and certificates are issued on completion of the course. The main objective of the course is to help understand the conventions of academic writing in English and gain knowledge about its components and benefits. It is called

process writing – a joint writing process in stages by students and teachers (Badger & White, 2000).

WEU consists of four modules: 1. WEU: An introduction; 2. Structuring your text and conveying your argument; 3. Using sources in academic writing; and 4. The writer’s toolbox: Editing and proofreading (Coursera, n.d.). Each module has different learning elements (which are given below) including video lectures, readings, quizzes, reflective self-assessment questions, and peer review exercises which involve interaction with other students taking the course.

The topic for week one is “WEU: An introduction” consisting of six components. The first component ‘Introduction’ includes a video on introduction of academic writing; and readings on course aims, expected workload and working methods used within this course, course structure, course material and the teachers; and the meet and greet discussion prompts. Secondly, ‘What is Academic Writing?’ component is structured around reading on what academic writing is; a video on what is academic writing; what we mean when we talk about academic writing; readings on general and more discipline-specific aspects of the field of academic writing. It also has a reflective discussion prompt: write something about what and where the student studies, his/her previous experience of academic writing, and reasons for taking this MOOC. The other lessons – interpreting the tasks, the writing process, feedback and peer review, resources for writers – are designed in the same structure included the similar kinds of activities. In the resources for writers’ section, exercises are used as online self-improvement exercises (Figure 1):

### Online self-improvement exercises

There are many excellent resources for language learners and academic writers available online. Here is a selection from Oxford Dictionaries that we suggest you try out.

Language questions:

- [Oxford Dictionaries Vocabulary Questions](#)
- [Oxford Dictionaries Questions about Dictionaries](#)

Interactive exercises:

- [Oxford Dictionaries Spelling Challenge](#)
- [Oxford Dictionaries Apostrophe Challenge](#)

In the [OxfordWords Blog](#), you will find many more quizzes and interesting facts about the English language.

Check out other dictionaries too; you will find that some of them offer great resources for writers and learners.

Mark as completed

Figure 1. Online self-improvement exercises

The topic for week two is structuring text and conveying argument in university writing. Following the similar activities and learning design principles as those in Week 1,

the lessons for Week Two incorporate structuring an argument; research questions and thesis statements; structuring a text around a three-part essay; structuring information; structuring paragraphs; IMRaD (Introduction-Methods-Results-Discussion); CARS: Creating a research space; and abstract writing. As an activity for research questions and thesis statements, a discussion forum is used to participate in a peer discussion. In the forum, the teacher facilitator and the students collaboratively participate in the activity as below (Figure 2). They are also prompted to look at their peers' responses about research questions and thesis statements, and provide feedback for those.

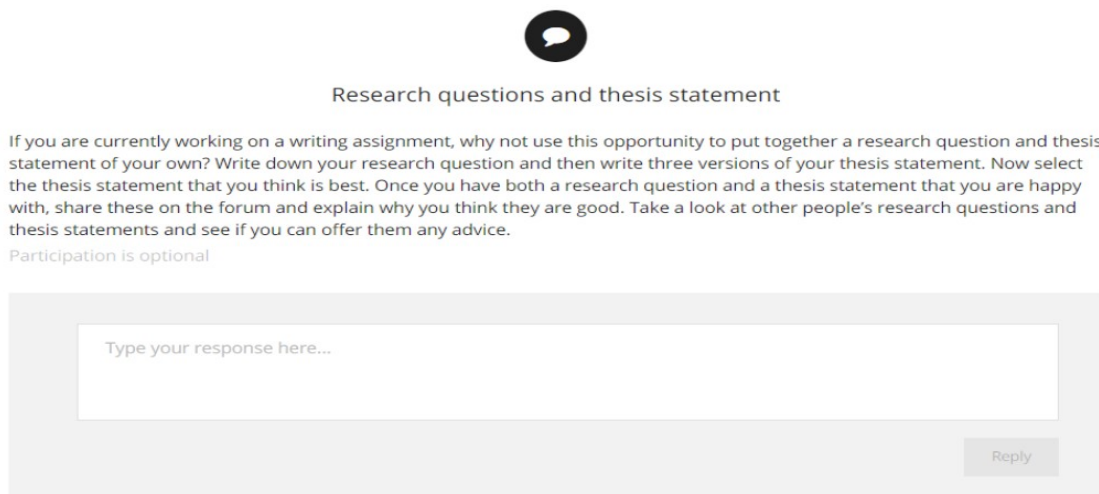


Figure 2. Peer Discussion Forum

The discussion forums are not only used for individual activities every week but for students' questions, too. Any student can post the question in the forum and participate in the discussion with her/his peers and instructor. Example of the weekly forum for questions and answers are is shown in Figure 3.

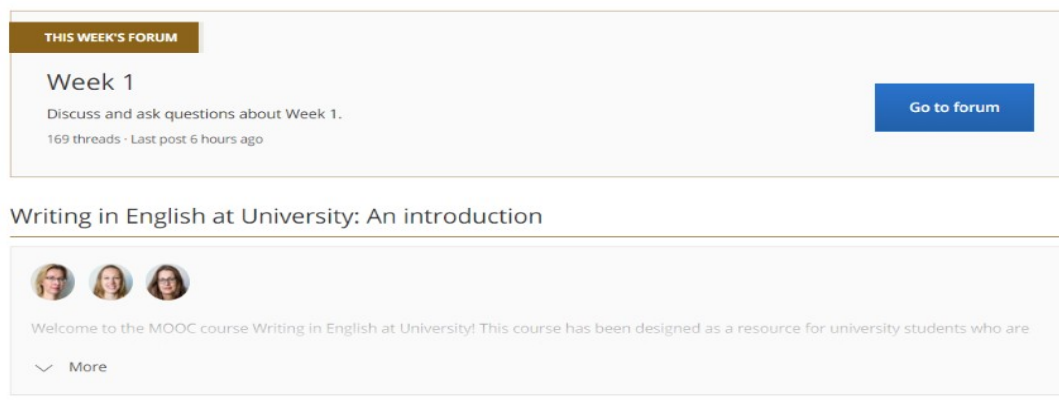


Figure 3. A sample of weekly forum

They can also search the topic of their interest or any discussion topic covered in the

course in the search buttons for weekly discussions forums (Figure 4).

Discussion Forums

## Week 1

Discuss and ask questions about Week 1.

SELECT THE SNIP MODE USING THE MC BUTTON.

Discussion Forum Interface:

- Sort by: Latest
- Search
- New Thread
- SUBFORUMS: All, Assignment: Peer review exercise
- General discussion forum (179 views, 17 replies) - Staff Replied - Last post by Yi Tian · 3 days ago
- Pause and reflect - September 16, 2019 (44 views, 44 replies) - Instructor Created - Last post by Leticia Paola Alabi · 7 hours ago
- Reflection task - September 16, 2019 (93 views, 93 replies) - Instructor Created - Last post by · 7 hours ago
- Meet and greet - October 14, 2019 (52 views, 52 replies) - Instructor Created - Last post by · 8 hours ago
- Reflection task - October 14, 2019 (14 views, 14 replies) - Instructor Created - Last post by Paulo Roberto cotrim · 8 hours ago
- Meet and greet - September 16, 2019 (198 views, 198 replies) - Instructor Created - Last post by Paul Morgane · 13 hours ago
- Pause and reflect - October 14, 2019 (8 views, 8 replies)

Figure 4. Week 1 Q&A and Discussion forum

In the section “Structuring information in academic contexts” some common patterns of structuring information are shown. They are general-to-specific, specific-to-general, problem-solution, sequence or chronology, cause and effect, and comparison/contrast. Also discussed is the CARS model (Swales, 1981): Creating a Research Space which involves three moves (Swales, 1990) with subsets. Sources in academic writing are covered in Week Three, which comprises lessons about reading strategies, integrating sources: positioning and stance, and referencing and academic integrity. Like other weeks, in this week, practices, quizzes, reading articles and discussion forums are used too although additionally a video lecture is used for reading strategy, integrating sources and referencing.

Finally, Week Four introduces the writer’s toolbox: editing and proofreading. The learning elements for this week are the needs to revise and edit one’s texts, revising and editing for language, which include some tips and tricks on common errors. A quiz activity is used to assess what the student understood by global editing (Figure 5).

## Global editing

TOTAL POINTS 3

1. When you check your essay text globally, what kinds of issues should you focus on?

1 point

What do you think?

Your answer cannot be more than 10000 characters.

2. Once you have checked for the thesis or focus and you are confident that this information is clearly presented in the introduction-part of your essay, you will need to check for the contents of the rest of the essay. How do you do that?

1 point

What do you think?

Your answer cannot be more than 10000 characters.

3. If a particular passage does not seem to fit in, what can you try to do, before you decide to delete the passage from the essay?

1 point

What do you think?

Your answer cannot be more than 10000 characters.

I understand that submitting work that isn't my own may result in permanent failure of this course or deactivation of my Coursera account.

[Learn more about Coursera's Honor Code](#)



Enter your legal name

Save

Submit

Figure 5. Quiz activity

Reasoning errors in essays is one of the main groups of errors that need to be identified while editing. In academic essays, all claims need to be backed up by relevant facts and evidence, and where the conclusions follow from the (right types of) premises. In order to understand the common problems in argumentation and reasoning for editing purpose, a reading activity is built in the week four activities. It is an external activity named [Logical Fallacies \(Purdue Online Writing Lab\)](#). Overall, all four weeks consist of four overarching topics with different learning elements mentioned above. Each learning element is designed

with different activities: lectures, readings, quizzes, and forums.

### **3. Evaluation of the *Writing in English at University* (WEU) course**

The principal purposes of the course are to provide an understanding of the conventions of academic writing in English, teach the components and benefits of process writing, and other related academic and learning skills needed for academic writing. They are ensured in this course by including lessons and activities around various conventions of academic writing. Similarly to the process writing approach, this course integrates teachers' facilitations in students' participation in the process of learning academic writing: brainstorming, outlining, drafting, revising, editing, and reflecting. However, in most lessons across four weeks, the widely practised PPP (presentation, practice and production) (Scrivener, 1994) is not employed, which may not scaffold the learning in its full potential. The model starts with input of language elements and ends with output, and in between are well controlled and freer activities. A Week Two lesson "Structuring paragraphs" does not demonstrate the full PPP model. The presentation phase is observed; however, the practice phase just has a quiz with two questions, which may not be deemed as enough practice to internalise the process of writing an academic paragraph. This lesson could have included any activity addressing the production phase where peers could review each other's works. This approach is nevertheless underpinned by the connected peer-learning approaches built on open source platforms (Siemens, 2008).

The aims of the course are validated by the current academic writing literature. The course claims in the aims section that "although we deal with generic skills in this course, many of the tasks are designed to encourage reflection on discipline specific conventions; this, in turn, will help you apply the generic skills to meet the particular needs of your course and your own discipline" (Coursera, n.d., Section. Course Aims). Johnson (2018) confirms the current evidenced-based use of generic academic writing skills because many institutions are currently offering the non-discipline based generic writing skills programs serving students from diverse disciplines. It is also claimed in the course that the academic writing skills can be transferred to professional contexts too. It is supported by Wingate's (2006) insight about university writing skill, which, as a study skill, is gradually developed and broadened to the wider areas of employability and lifelong learning.

This course has adopted an integrated online pedagogical approach coined recently, which is Multimodal Model for Online Education (Picciano, 2017). This model is an integrated model of major learning theories such as behaviourism, cognitivism, social constructivism (Schunk, 2012) and connectivism (Goldie, 2016). The attributes of the learning theories are

embedded in this course: self-study, independent learning, review of workshop/seminar contents, reflection, Socratic Method/dialectic, community of practice, interaction and situated learning, collaboration. At the centre of the course, it is attempted to create the community of practice of students and teachers (Wenger, 1991, 1999). This is a practical social learning approach where creating a learning community is central to situated learning practices scaffolded by the interactions amongst teachers and students. In the multi-modal integrated model, seven learning components that encompass the learning community are contents, social/emotional aspects, self-paced/independent study, dialectics/questionings, evaluations/assessments, collaboration, and reflection (Picciano, 2017). The contents are presented in reading and video media on Coursera online learning platform. The student can reflect on different learning experiences in the discussion forums, which is a powerful pedagogical strategy (Mayor, 2003; Garrison, Anderson, and Archer, 2001). Participants are also able to participate in collaborations and peer reviews, and student generated contents in the weekly activities of this course. Evaluation and assessment activities are employed in WEU as they are considered important vehicles for creating knowledge and content, as well as for generating peer-review and evaluation (Fredericksen, 2015). Some of the activities used in this course are quizzes, reflective self-assessment questions, and peer review exercises. An instance of peer review discussion is when an activity asks students to reflect on their current strengths and areas for development and keep a record of this as she/he will need to refer back to it during the course. This activity also encompasses the other self-paced independent study by using an adaptive software. More dialectical / questioning elements still could be included in the activities as they would stimulate discussion by asking the “right” questions to help students think critically about a topic.

Overall, connected with the four main topics, the lessons in each module are logically sequenced, actively presented, focused and explicit. Each module consists of a number of lessons, where the teaching consists of short video lectures, reading assignments and participating in activities. In connection with the video lectures and reading assignments, there are various other assignments, such as quizzes, reflective self-assessment questions, and some peer review exercises in which the students will have an opportunity to interact with peers taking the course. Although there are a number of peer-to-peer, and teachers-to-students discussion forums crafted in the course design, some of the limitations of this course are “the interactions among students are mediated, there is an absence of non-verbal cues, and text-on-screen is a very limited mode for what should be semantically rich exchanges” (Curtis & Lawson, 2001, p. 22). The online course may not address the social and emotional aspects of



learning in the same way the face-to-face tutoring and interactions would (Bosch, 2016); however, the interactions in the discussion forum may compensate this to some extent. Research has demonstrated that social and emotional presence in a course is important both for students' and teachers' learning and teaching satisfaction: teacher immediacy behaviours and more active presence of others could have been appropriate for this course to be more effective and engaging WE.

#### 4. Conclusion

WEU is an example of an open access approach to English language learning in MOOC environment. It is a parallel approach to the traditional mode of language learning and education. The course incorporates most basic components of academic writing underpinned in multimodal learning theories and pedagogical strategies. It attempts to cater for the affective aspects of learning by including interactions in discussion forums; however, students' feedback about the course components and activities may be useful to evaluate the course effectively. This course can prove useful to academic English language learners and teachers across the world.

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