

# Evaluating Academic Writing Support at St Peter's College

## A Case Study Using Most Significant Change Methodology to Understand Impact and Learning in the Collegiate University

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## Executive Summary

This report presents findings from a case study of academic writing support at St Peter's College, conducted as part of a broader Centre for Teaching and Learning (CTL) project examining effective [academic skills development](#) interventions across Oxford's collegiate university. Using the [Most Significant Change](#) methodology, this evaluation captured detailed accounts of students' experiences with the college's academic writing course to understand what characterises effective academic skills development in a college setting.

This case study forms part of CTL's wider evaluation framework for understanding academic skills development, which employs multiple methodologies across different contexts to build a comprehensive evidence base for informing future provision across the university.

The study engaged ten students from diverse academic backgrounds and levels of study in in-depth interviews about their experiences with academic writing development. Their stories were then analysed by peer reviewers – the same ten students read each other's stories – and supplemented with insights from the course tutor. This participatory approach yielded rich insights into

how students experience and benefit from academic skills support within a college context.

**Key findings** from this case study reveal several characteristics of effective academic skills development:

1. The value of explicit instruction in academic writing conventions combined with discipline-specific application
2. The importance of timing of the course and scaffolding in skills development interventions
3. The role of peer learning and group discussion in building confidence
4. The benefits of combining structured course content with individualised mentoring
5. The importance of integrating feedback from students' subject tutors with academic writing support, enabling students to connect academic writing principles with discipline-specific requirements

These findings contribute to a growing evidence base informing university-wide understanding of effective academic skills provision. However, it is important to note that this case study examines one specific model of academic writing support within a particular college context. The findings should therefore be considered alongside other strands of CTL's academic skills development research, including evaluations of different college models and university-wide provision.

This case study reveals both the possibilities and challenges of college-based academic skills support. While demonstrating positive impacts on student confidence and writing ability, it also highlights resource considerations and the need for careful coordination between college-level support and broader university provision. These insights can inform ongoing discussions about how best to develop and deliver academic skills support across the collegiate university.

The report concludes by identifying key learning points for consideration by the broader university community as it continues to develop and enhance academic skills provision. These reflections aim to contribute to university-wide dialogue about effective approaches to supporting students' academic development within Oxford's collegiate structure.

## Introduction

This report presents a case study of academic writing support at St Peter's College, conducted as part of the Centre for Teaching and Learning's (CTL) broader investigation into effective academic skills development across Oxford's collegiate university. The study employs the Most Significant Change

methodology, as described below in the Methodology section. This method aligns with current theoretical understanding of academic literacies as socially situated practices encompassing linguistic, cognitive and sociocultural elements (Li, 2022), allowing us to examine how students integrate both academic writing skills and discipline-specific academic competencies while developing their scholarly identities and voices within their academic communities. This integration of language-based analysis, cognitive strategy instruction, and critical examination of literacy practices is central to understanding how students develop as active participants in their disciplinary discourse communities.

This case study contributes to CTL's larger investigation addressing the question: "What characterises effective academic skills development interventions within a college setting?" Through in-depth examination of one specific intervention, the study provides detailed insights that complement CTL's broader evaluation framework, which includes comparative analysis of different college models, university-wide surveys and assessments, analysis of embedded academic skills provision, and investigation of disciplinary-specific approaches.

By examining how one college approaches academic writing development, this study contributes to broader understanding of several key areas: the role colleges can play in academic skills provision, the interaction between college-level and university-wide support, factors that enable or constrain effective skills development, and ways to balance academic writing principles with discipline-specific needs. The insights generated will inform ongoing discussions about structuring and delivering academic skills support across Oxford's collegiate system, while acknowledging the need for flexible approaches that can adapt to different institutional contexts.

The academic writing course at St Peter's College represents one established approach to college-based academic skills provision. Developed by Academic English specialists from the Language Centre and offered to St Peter's students twice a year for the past eight years, the course combines structured group teaching with individualised support. While focused on writing skills, the course illustrates broader questions about how colleges can effectively support students' academic development across disciplines, from undergraduate to postgraduate level.

## **Overview of the Academic Writing Course**

The course structure consists of two main components. The core element is a three-day intensive course held in 0th week of both Michaelmas and Hilary terms, with three hours of group tuition each day. Up to 20 students can attend each iteration, with separate groups in each term. This component is

open to undergraduate, taught postgraduate, and research postgraduate students, allowing for cross-disciplinary discussion and peer learning.

For undergraduate participants only, an additional one-to-one mentoring session provides personalised feedback on their writing. These sessions are delivered by experienced academic writers, including postdoctoral researchers and graduate students, who are recruited through tutor recommendations from across the university and compensated for their work. This targeted support helps undergraduates apply course principles to their specific disciplinary contexts.

As we were able to observe in two of three sessions of the iteration of the writing course in HT2024, the curriculum covers various aspects of academic writing, including essay structure, clarity, concision, and argumentation. Through both group work and individual guidance, students learn to:

- Structure clear, focused paragraphs and coherent arguments
- Write concisely and precisely using techniques like the "twenty-word rule"
- Adapt general writing principles to disciplinary conventions
- Develop confidence in presenting and defending academic arguments
- Engage critically with sources and develop their academic voice

This comprehensive approach helps students develop both general academic writing skills and the ability to adapt these skills to their specific disciplines, while building confidence in their academic writing abilities.

# Methodology

This case study employs the Most Significant Change (MSC) methodology, a participatory monitoring and evaluation technique developed by Rick Davies in 1996. MSC involves collecting and systematically selecting stories of significant change from programme participants, and analysing these stories through multiple organisational levels to understand impact (Davies & Dart, 2005). The methodology is particularly valuable for complex interventions with diverse outcomes, as it captures rich qualitative data about change while engaging stakeholders in meaningful dialogue about what constitutes significant impact (Davies & Dart, 2005; TASO, 2021).

At its core, MSC asks participants to respond to a simple but profound question: "Looking back over the last period, what do you think was the most significant change that occurred?" (Cooper, 2016). The process then involves systematic selection of these stories by different stakeholder groups, who must discuss and reach consensus on which changes they consider most significant, documenting their reasons for selection (Davies & Dart, 2005). This creates multiple layers of analysis and learning, from participants to practitioners to organisational leadership.

The methodology is well-suited to evaluating academic skills development as it can capture unexpected outcomes and complex changes that may be difficult to measure through traditional metrics alone (TASO, 2021). For this case study of St Peter's College's academic writing course, we have adapted the core MSC approach while maintaining its key elements: story collection, systematic selection, and feedback loops. This allows us to understand both the immediate impact on students' academic writing abilities and broader insights about effective academic skills support within Oxford's collegiate system.

As mentioned in the introduction, this approach aligns with current theoretical understanding of academic literacies as socially situated practices, while complementing the quantitative and mixed-methods approaches being used across CTL's wider evaluation framework.

The evaluation process followed several key stages. First, we worked with the college to email students who had taken part in the academic writing course over the previous four years. Students who expressed an interest in the study were then selected purposively. This purposive sampling approach aimed to capture diverse experiences of the course's impact. We selected ten students to ensure representation across academic levels (from first-year undergraduates to doctoral researchers) and across disciplines (humanities, social sciences, STEM).

Data collection centred on in-depth, semi-structured interviews where students were asked to reflect on what they considered to be the most significant

changes in their academic writing development since taking the course. Each student shared detailed narratives about their experiences, providing specific examples of how their writing approach and confidence had evolved. These interviews typically lasted 60-90 minutes, allowing for deep exploration of individual journeys.

The participatory element of MSC was strengthened through a systematic peer review process. Following the individual interviews, anonymised stories were shared with all participants, who then reviewed and analysed them giving feedback via MS Forms. Students identified common themes across the narratives and, importantly, selected which story represented the most significant change in academic writing development. In this case, Student 10's journey from struggling with basic essay structure to developing confidence in academic writing was selected as particularly significant, with peers noting how it demonstrated transformative change in both skills and academic identity.

To complement student perspectives, the course tutor was invited to respond to the student-selected story and emerging themes. This added valuable context about pedagogical intentions and observations of student development patterns. The tutor's insights helped illuminate how theoretical principles of academic literacies are translated into practical teaching approaches.

## **Analysis Process**

The analysis process moved through several stages:

1. Initial thematic analysis of individual interview transcripts
2. Synthesis of peer reviewers' feedback and story selection rationale
3. Integration of tutor perspectives
4. Identification of patterns relevant to broader academic skills provision
5. Contextualisation within institutional frameworks

## **Methodological Considerations**

Throughout the process, we maintained close alignment with CTL's wider evaluation framework through connection to validated question sets and complementary focus on student experience and outcomes. This integration ensures that insights from this case study can meaningfully contribute to broader understanding of academic skills development across the collegiate university.

The study was conducted under CUREC approval, with careful attention to ethical considerations including informed consent, participant anonymity, data protection, and the power dynamics inherent in educational research. These

considerations were particularly important given the close-knit college community context.

This methodological approach serves dual purposes: generating specific insights about St Peter's academic writing support while contributing to broader understanding of effective academic skills evaluation approaches. While acknowledging the bounded nature of case study research, the rich, contextual data generated through this participatory process enable meaningful contribution to understanding effective academic skills development within Oxford's collegiate system.



# Key Findings

This section presents key findings from the St Peter's College case study, structured around the themes that emerged through the Most Significant Change (MSC) process. Through peer review, students identified Student 10's narrative as representing the most significant transformation, particularly highlighting the journey from struggling with basic essay writing to developing both technical skills and academic confidence. As one peer reviewer noted: "Student 10's story shows the most significant change in academic writing ability due to their profound transformation from a novice, struggling to grasp basic essay writing concepts, to a confident and skilled writer who effectively integrates complex academic techniques."

The themes that emerged from analysis of all ten stories reveal several key dimensions of effective academic writing support:

## 1. From Uncertainty to Structured Writing

Students consistently reported transformation in their ability to structure academic writing. Student 10's selected narrative captured this journey powerfully: "I basically had no idea how to write an essay; it was a big adjustment... Having more time to do an essay/going back to it made me feel a lot more confident in the essay." Other students echoed this development, with Student 4 noting: "I used to combine too many points in one paragraph. Right now, I focus on one point per paragraph."

## 2. Developing Concision and Clarity

The "rule of twenty words" emerged as a particularly impactful technique across multiple stories. Student 7 described how this rule helped make their writing "smoother" and "like a published article." Student 8 expressed surprise at the impact: "Forced me to be really concise, shocked me how much I could write in such a short length. This is the first time I feel I can write this confidently."

## 3. Building Academic Voice and Confidence

A recurring theme was the development of confidence in presenting academic arguments. Student 3 reflected on their journey: "I didn't want to make the obvious point, but now I make that point as it is often the right point." This shift from hesitancy to confidence was particularly valued by peer reviewers, who noted how it demonstrated the course's impact beyond technical writing skills.



#### **4. Value of Multiple Support Mechanisms**

Students highlighted how different elements of the course complemented each other. The combination of group work and individual mentoring was frequently cited as valuable. As one student noted in the peer feedback: "It seems that many benefitted greatly from the 1-to-1 mentoring with a graduate student. Perhaps graduate students are more attuned than tutors with how to deliver specific points of technical ability to a younger audience."

#### **5. Integration with Disciplinary Writing**

Students described successfully adapting general writing principles to their specific subjects. Student 1, a STEM student, observed: "When I started my PhD project, it was hard to clearly deliver. First hard to summarise, to write in the form of professional way. Along the way I did improve." This ability to transfer skills across contexts was seen as particularly valuable.

#### **Tutor's Response to Student Stories**

The course tutor's response to these narratives provided valuable context about the pedagogical approach. While increased confidence was not an explicit course goal, the tutor noted it emerged as a positive unintended outcome of the group work approach. The tutor emphasised how students are encouraged to become "genre analysts" in their fields, identifying and adapting to discipline-specific writing conventions.

#### **Integration with Broader Understanding of Academic Skills Development**

Through the MSC process, this case study has highlighted how local college-based interventions can inform broader understanding of effective academic skills development. The findings suggest that successful academic writing support requires a carefully balanced ecosystem of support mechanisms. While the specific intervention studied here was college-based, the insights point to principles that could inform university-wide provision:

1. The value of combining structured support with informal learning opportunities, where explicit instruction in writing conventions is complemented by organic peer discussions and experiential learning
2. The importance of creating safe spaces for academic identity development, where students can take risks with their writing and receive constructive feedback without fear of academic penalties
3. The potential for cross-disciplinary peer learning to enhance students' understanding of different academic writing genres and conventions

4. The benefits of flexible delivery models that can respond to different disciplinary contexts while maintaining core principles of good academic writing

These findings contribute to understanding how different levels of academic skills provision - from college-based courses to departmental support to central university services - might work together more effectively to support student development. They also highlight the need to consider both technical skill development and the broader social and emotional aspects of becoming confident academic writers.

# Discussion: Contributing to Understanding Effective Academic Skills Development

This case study of St Peter's College academic writing course provides valuable insights into how students experience and benefit from college-based academic skills support. The selection of Student 10's transformative journey as the most significant change story particularly illuminates how writing support can address fundamental challenges faced by students transitioning to university-level academic writing.

Particularly noteworthy is how students' narratives demonstrate the interweaving of technical skill development with growing academic confidence and disciplinary identity. As one peer reviewer observed in analysing the stories: "Because the person suggested how the improved writing skill helps shaping the content. The writing is not just about grammar or mannerism, but it is closely linked with a person's idea. A clear structure allows a person to demonstrate one's persuasive idea."

The college setting provides a unique context for this development. The small-group learning environment and cross-disciplinary student community create opportunities for peer learning and discussion that students particularly valued. As evident in their stories, the integration with the tutorial system allowed students to immediately apply new writing skills to their academic work, while the mix of group teaching and individual mentoring provided complementary forms of support.

The study reveals how college-based provision can effectively complement broader university support systems. The success of this particular intervention highlights the potential for colleges to play a significant role in students' academic development, while also raising important questions about coordination across the institution. Student narratives suggest that effective academic skills provision benefits from multiple, complementary approaches operating at different institutional levels, combining college and central university support.

Several elements of the St Peter's model warrant consideration for broader application. The combination of explicit instruction with individualised support, the integration of peer learning, and the focus on helping students adapt writing skills to their real-world disciplinary contexts all emerged as valuable components. However, it is important to acknowledge, as the tutor's response emphasised, that implementation of similar approaches elsewhere would need careful consideration of local contexts and resources.

This case study further suggests the importance of maintaining flexibility in approaches to academic skills development, recognising that different institutional contexts may require different solutions while working toward

shared goals of supporting student success. As one student reflected in reviewing their peers' stories: "I think that most students accepted the advice provided by the course or their tutor, that allowed them to improve their writing in no time. I believe that the access to information is the most important element in growth and improvement."

## Conclusion

This case study of St Peter's College academic writing course, through its use of the Most Significant Change methodology, provides valuable insights into the characteristics of effective academic skills development within Oxford's collegiate system. The process of gathering and collectively analysing student narratives has captured rich evidence of how structured writing support can transform students' academic capabilities and confidence.

The selection of Student 10's journey as the most significant change story - moving from "basically had no idea how to write an essay" to developing confident, skilled academic writing - exemplifies the transformative potential of well-designed academic skills support. As peer reviewers noted, this narrative demonstrated not just technical improvement but profound development in academic identity and confidence. Such transformation was achieved through what students identified as key elements: explicit instruction in writing conventions, opportunities for individualised support, peer learning across disciplines, and help in adapting skills to specific subject contexts.

However, this study represents just one piece in the larger puzzle of understanding effective academic skills development across the collegiate university. The student stories reveal both the possibilities and challenges of college-based academic writing support. While demonstrating positive impacts on student confidence and writing ability, they also highlight the importance of considering resource implications and institutional coordination when developing such support.

The insights gained through this evaluation - about the value of structured instruction, the importance of timing and accessibility, and the benefits of multiple support mechanisms - provide useful reference points for ongoing discussions about academic skills provision. As one student insightfully noted in reviewing their peers' experiences: "Annoyingly, I think one aspect that affects development is just time. The more you write and read, the better you get, and in some aspects, I don't think this can be rushed. However, consciously taking in this advice, such as forcing yourself to look back at your own essays and interrogate your own argument, structure and language would help."

As CTL continues its broader investigation of effective academic skills development, this case study offers encouraging evidence of how colleges can contribute to students' academic growth while raising important questions for further exploration. The findings suggest that successful academic skills provision requires careful consideration of both local contexts and institutional coordination, pointing toward the value of continued dialogue and collaboration across the collegiate university.

Ultimately, this study affirms the importance of evidence-based approaches to developing academic writing and academic skills support, while demonstrating the value of qualitative, student-centred evaluation methods in understanding what works and why. As the university continues to enhance its academic skills provision, insights from this and other case studies will help inform approaches that effectively support all students in developing the academic capabilities they need to thrive at Oxford.

## References

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