

IMPROVE YOUR WRITING

Introduction

Writing is, of course, an essential part of the English course you have started on and this year you will be writing many different sorts of texts in English. According to the curriculum, by the end of the year each student is expected to be able to:

- *uttrykke seg skriftlig og muntlig på en nyansert og situasjonstilpasset måte, med flyt, presisjon og sammenheng*

It sounds demanding, doesn't it? Well, all it is really saying is that you should be able to write (and speak) as well as possible – which is hardly a surprise. But the term *situasjonstilpasset måte* is worth taking a closer look at here. In your English learning so far, your teachers have generally been pleased when you have been able to express your thoughts and ideas clearly, fluently and correctly. This year there will be more emphasis than earlier on another aspect of language use: that your English is suited to the situation and genre (text type). Another bullet point in the curriculum puts it like this:

(Eleven skal kunne)

- *velge hensiktsmessige lytte-, tale-, lese- og skrivestrategier tilpasset formål, situasjon og sjanger*

The language we use is a bit like the clothes we wear: we wear different clothes for different purposes and in different settings. You wouldn't wear a suit or an evening gown to the beach – or shorts and a t-shirt to a funeral. (Or if you did, you would be prepared to discover that some people would find your attire ridiculous or even offensive.) Similarly, you

would be a little surprised and confused if you came across an official sign that read:

Look, sunshine – you park your car here and you're in deep shit, OK?

And you would be equally bewildered if your best friend sent you the following sms:

I respectfully request the pleasure of your company for the partaking of liquid refreshment after the termination of today's studies.

We call this aspect of language *register*. Both these examples show incorrect use of register – i.e. the type of language is not suited to the given situation. Now, there is a lot of fun to be had by using the *wrong* register, but it is important to be flexible enough in your English to be able to use the *right* register when you need to. Young Norwegian learners of English are generally pretty good at informal, conversational English – the linguistic version of shorts and t-shirt. After all, you have heard a lot of it on American and British television programmes and films. (Be grateful that they are not “dubbed” as they are in many countries!) But you will probably have to make more of an effort when writing more serious, formal genres that are less familiar to you. So these need to be practised.

Let's be clear – writing a text requires planning. The romantic myth of the great writer who spontaneously grasps his pen and scribbles a masterpiece is just that – a myth. Whether you are writing a fairy story, a poem, an essay or an application for a job, some sort of preparation is required.

It's best to start the process as soon as you have been given the task, at least in your head. Don't put off thinking about it just because you are not going to write it yet. Turning it over in your mind – and discussing it with others – is a vital part of the writing process. It is how you gather material for your text.

Some people find they can speed up the process by “brainstorming”, i.e. by writing down all the ideas that occur to them on a sheet of paper without worrying too much how good or relevant they are at this stage. Other people turn these sheets into spider diagrams or drawings. Everyone has their own preferences here.

Activities

There's one thing you must do before you write your plan – read the task again. Ask yourself:

What does this task require of me? Does it require more than one thing? In other words, are there several parts to it? It sounds obvious, but you would be surprised how many disappointments are caused by people misreading or misunderstanding the task. When you are sure that you have understood it you can start writing your plan.

An essay plan is the skeleton from which you will write your essay. Your job at this stage is to sort the material and ideas you have gathered and put them in a logical order. Ideally, each “bone in the skeleton” (or bullet point in the essay plan) corresponds to an idea, an argument or a piece of information which will become “fleshed out” to make a paragraph in your finished essay. It is a good idea to think in terms of paragraphs at the planning stage of an essay. (You can read more about paragraphs on p. 167)

Once you have an essay plan you are satisfied with, you can start writing. Don't worry if things occur to you afterwards, when you are writing – things that are not in your plan. It's there to help you, not to hinder you. You can make whatever changes you need as you go along.

1 INFORMAL MESSAGES

Below are some examples of informal (sometimes very informal!) messages giving information or warnings. Read through them and then discuss how you can tell that this is informal oral English, rather than, for example, the sort of English you would find on a written notice.

- a I say, would you mind taking off your shoes before you go into the mosque?
- b Look, sunshine – you park your car here and you're in deep shit, OK?
- c By the way, if you want to use the toilet you'll have to ask the lady at the counter and she'll give you the key.
- d Look, these cliffs are just incredibly dangerous, so if you go fooling around and fall off it's your own silly fault, alright?

2 FORMAL MESSAGES

Below are some examples of formal written notices or messages. Read through them and discuss how they differ from the informal messages you just read.

- a Passengers travelling with small children are requested to come to the front of the queue.
- b Private property. Trespassers will be prosecuted.
- c Smoking prohibited, except in designated area.
- d Mr and Mrs Terence Beastly-Rich request the honour of your presence at the marriage of their daughter Pippa to Mr Justin Slime on Saturday June 10.

3 TRANSFORM THE MESSAGES

Now transform the messages in activity 1 into written formal messages and those in activity 2 into oral informal ones.