The aim of this leaflet
This advice sheet helps you analyze your needs in writing and offers tips for you to plan and organize your learning. It is designed to give you guidance on how to develop a self-study program for yourself.

Analyzing your needs
You want to improve your writing skills — but what specific skills are you thinking of? Spend a few minutes to answer the following questions and reflect on your needs.

1. Can you identify an obvious writing need to focus on?
   If ‘yes’, what is it?
   If ‘no’, why do you want to improve your writing skills?

2. What is the level of your English writing?
   - Elementary
   - Lower intermediate
   - Upper intermediate
   - Advanced

3. What type(s) of writing do you need to produce now and/or in the near future?

4. What type(s) of text do you find most difficult to write? Why?

5. Why do you find it difficult to write such types of writing (referring to the answer to Q4)?

6. Have you got any ideas how to improve your writing skills by using self-access methods?

7. Can you anticipate how much time per week you will spend on improving your writing skills?

After you have analyzed your needs, you should know what areas of writing you want to improve. You are most welcome to discuss your needs with any of our Writing Advisers; we are very happy to help you devise a learning plan to improve your writing skills.
Planning your learning
In order to help you plan your learning, please complete the following statements:

- The writing skill(s) that I want to improve: ___________________
- The Writing Advice Sheet(s) that I have read: W3 W4 W5 W6 W7
- I find the Writing Advice Sheet W __ most useful.
- My learning goal: I want to be able to _______________________  

In your learning plan, you should consider the following aspects:

- Learning methods/styles:
  Many students think learning English by using the self-access methods means having to go regularly to the Language Commons to do language exercises or listen to the CDs. While you are most welcome to use any materials or facilities in the Language Commons to make your learning enjoyable and effective, learning English with self-access methods DOESN’T mean that you have to go to the Language Commons regularly. It’s perfectly OK if you want to stay at home to study English – all you have to do is to figure out your learning styles and preferences and then make sure that you feel good in the learning process. For example, if you enjoy studying English in your dormitory with music on, then you should try to get learning materials that you can use in your room.

- Time management:
  How regularly will you do the learning? How much time per week? Try to be realistic: if you plan to spend 5 hours per week on reading and another 5 hours on writing, ask yourself whether you can really stick to it. Most people find it more realistic to set aside a fixed time for practicing writing; for example, 30 minutes before going to bed, or every Saturday morning etc.

- Learning materials:
  What learning materials will you use? Books? Websites? CD-ROMS? The learning materials for writing do not have to be print materials; speaking materials or listening materials are equally good for improving your writing. For example, you can improve your vocabulary and writing by listening to speeches and lectures. There are many innovative ways to make writing fun – one of the ways is to expose yourself to different materials.

- Evaluation methods:
  What will you do to check that you are making progress? Do you want to count the errors in your writing? Do you want to check if the fluency in your writing has improved? Or do you want to see if the organization in your writing is getting better? The evaluation methods will be different depending on your learning goals. So it is important to think about your learning goal and how realistic your plan is, then you can judge if your evaluation methods are effective. Do make an appointment with a Writing Adviser to discuss your evaluation methods.

Taking action & reflecting on your learning

A good way to get started is to make an appointment with one of the Writing Advisers and show him/her your learning plan.

First of all, select the materials you like and think about the learning methods. The next step is: do it! When you encounter difficulties, come talk to our Writing Advisers — we’re all very happy to help you.
It is also important that you record your learning experience. When you reflect on your learning experience, you are evaluating and monitoring the progress of your own learning program. And this is the first sign of success.

Want to have a look at a learning journal? The following is a learning journal written by Steve who is studying Civil Engineering at HKUST. He has planned to improve his writing skills through reading:

August 4th 2012

Today I spent 30 minutes in the Language Commons reading an English magazine that I found on the magazine rack. It was a special edition of Newsweek. The cover article seemed interesting. It was about the London Olympics. Anyway, I read a couple of pages of the first article and found there were a few other articles on the same topic ……

I got so interested in the magazine so I decided to go back the next day. Last time when I chatted with Jessie, one of the Writing Advisers, she asked me to ‘observe’ how I can improve my writing skills through reading. In the past, I copied new words and phrases in a notebook and thought I would revise them from time to time. But of course I never did — sometimes I didn’t even manage to find the notebook!! What can I do now? Now I have found something interesting to read and I really want to find out how reading can help me improve my writing. But what should I do? Well, this time I will try something new — I will write a page or two about the article that I have read. For example, I have read the article about “Track and Field Events” and now I will write something to respond to what I have read from the magazine. I think this will be fun. …

You have probably noticed that Steve is not following a traditional way to improve his writing. He is willing to try out different strategies and see if he can write better by using new methods.

Whether you’re like Steve who wants to try out new strategies, or you prefer using traditional ways to improve your writing, you have to take action and do it.

**Creating writing opportunities**

- **Entering a Writing Contest**
  Writing contests can be fun and a motivation to get something written. Before entering a contest, however, be sure to check what rights you’re giving away, and whether you need to send an entry fee. If you’re entering an on-line writing contest, make sure you know what kind of personal details you’re disclosing.

**Note:**
While a lot of writing contest sites are real and even prestigious, some are fake which have only one aim — to take your money. In order to play safe, never enter any writing contest which takes an entry fee. If you want to know more about the warnings and cautions for writing contests, read this site: [http://www.sfwa.org/for-authors/writer-beware/contests/](http://www.sfwa.org/for-authors/writer-beware/contests/)
• **Sending a ‘Letter to the Editor’**
  
  [http://www.lexicon.net/peterc/Pages/WRIT_LET.HTM](http://www.lexicon.net/peterc/Pages/WRIT_LET.HTM)

  This website gives you guidelines and tips for writing a ‘letter to the editor’. Why write to the ‘editor’? Because one of the most powerful tools for changing public opinion is ‘the Letter to the Editor’. Every day, millions of people turn to their newspapers’ editorial pages to see what others are thinking about current events.

  Want to give it a try and send a letter to the editor of SCMP?

• **Reading and Writing Film Reviews**


  From this website: [http://www.rottentomatoes.com/top/](http://www.rottentomatoes.com/top/), you can find reviews of almost any film. Have a go — this is an extremely comprehensive film review site. **You can also send your film reviews to the site.**

• **Forming your own Reading/Writing Group**

  Are you thinking of forming your own Reading/Writing Group so that you can have your private forum to discuss your reading and display your writing? What can you write? Anything you want: essays, diaries, film reviews, book reviews, travelling journals and so on. Why don’t you come to the Language Commons and talk to our Advisers. They will be happy to have a chat with you about forming a reading/writing group.

**Learning tips**

• **You will be able to write better if you have ideas.** So read widely before you write. For more information about reading skills, read the Advice Sheets on Reading: R4, R5, R6 and R7.

• **Set yourself a regular ‘reading time’ just to enjoy reading in English.** Don’t force yourself to read academic materials if they are not your cup of tea. Come to the Language Commons and see if you find our magazines and newspapers (located near the reception in Room 3018 in the Language Commons) interesting. Just relax and do some reading. And why read regularly? The answer is simple – your writing skills will naturally improve if you keep reading because you are constantly feeding yourself with English input.

• **Writing is not a one-off activity.** You need to allow yourself time to think, write, and rewrite. You will enjoy writing more if you allow yourself ample time to do the thinking, writing and editing. Like any other skills you can think of, writing skills won’t be improved over a few days. Be patient and keep practicing.

• **Make writing a habit.** Apart from course assignments, there are other kinds of writing you may enjoy — diaries, learning journals, emails, letters to friends and so on. If you want to know more about using learning journals to record your learning experiences, make an appointment with our Advisers. They will be happy to discuss this with you.
• **What is stopping you from writing effectively?** Grammar? Sentence Structures? Vocabulary? Simply make an appointment with a Writing Adviser and s/he will discuss with you what areas of writing you can improve in.

Apart from getting help from the Writing Advisers, different academic departments do offer additional support to students to improve their English skills. Science and Engineering students, for instance, can seek advice from their department’s communication tutors.

• **Do a diagnostic test** for grammar and/or vocabulary level (please read Grammar Advice Sheet G3 and/or Vocabulary Advice Sheet V5 for more information on online tests), find out your weaknesses in writing and then decide what practice you need to improve your writing skills. You need to identify the areas that need improvement — simply writing more won’t necessarily make your writing better.

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**In a nutshell…**

Writing skills are related to other language skills, especially reading skills. If you want to improve your writing skills, the key is to read and write more.

**In order to improve your writing, you should make writing and reading part of your life. Why don’t you:**

- Write learning journals to record your learning experience
- Find a learning partner
- Write book reports, film reviews etc
- Write whenever you want; bring a nice little notebook wherever you go
- Take writing as a skill or hobby (such as swimming or playing tennis) that you always want to do better
- Come to the Language Commons to read magazines or newspapers
- Make an appointment to see a Writing Adviser to devise your own learning plan

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**And now…**

If you would like any help or advice, or just a chat about your progress, please get in touch - we are here to support your independent learning! To contact us:

- make an appointment to see an adviser. For details of advisers and their availability, please go to [http://ilang.cle.ust.hk/writing-adviser-timetables/](http://ilang.cle.ust.hk/writing-adviser-timetables/).
- e-mail your questions to iLANG ([lcilang@ust.hk](mailto:lcilang@ust.hk)).
- ask at the reception counter of the Language Commons — if the receptionist cannot help you directly, s/he will pass your query on to one of the advisers.

**What else can you do?**

- browse the many physical and online materials for Writing.
- join a Writing activity or short course.

*Last Updated: February 2012*