Introduction

As a template containing guidelines, suggestions, and solutions, the boilerplate acts as an aid to students and teachers writing papers, reports, essays and theses in English. It helps improve written English skills (particularly with regard to structuring a text), linguistic accuracy, and stylistic sensitivity. Unlike the system already available in Microsoft Word, it is tailored to specific subjects and types of document. It can be updated on a regular basis, is user-friendly as well as time-saving (once the tool is mastered) and is inexpensive to produce.

Using text editors is part of the standard student and teacher knowledge base, yet higher-level functions such as those the boilerplate utilizes can be confusing if one does not consider the knowledge level of the user. The Boilerplate project takes into consideration pedagogical issues that both teachers and students face when using computer programs in their courses. When using any technological program, it is important to reflect upon Human-Computer Interaction (HCI) issues such as usability and user-friendliness. One area that Usability Studies investigates is how easy a particular program is to use. Many users will never read a detailed instruction manual; they rely on previous experience in order to help them comprehend and use the program in the belief that the program is more intuitive than it actually is. The clarity of the program's design is particularly important with regard to the ease with which the user is able to interact with/use the program. Both students and teachers use technology for different purposes and have expectations not only of which desktop icons should be visibly accessible but also where these should be located. A case in point is the operating systems MS XP, MS Vista and the new Windows 7. All three have the traditional Start icon in the lower left hand corner, and the clock in the lower right hand corner.

Programmers and technology majors with a broader level of knowledge and experience will readily identify familiar icons in unfamiliar places; their level of experience will also enable them to recognize unfamiliar icons where familiar ones are expected (Nielsen, 2009). As a result, when students and teachers use a program, they will anticipate these icons on the basis of previous experience. By utilizing a user-friendly program that is familiar to both teachers and students there is more focus on the task, as there is no need to learn a new program.

The strict conventions pertaining to academic English are not always readily identifiable, neither are they easy to master for English-as-a-Second-Language users. The boilerplate builds on two basic, built-in alternatives in Word for dealing with problems. The first is when a document, as opposed to the user, takes advantage of and acts upon options that automatically correct the spelling and grammatical mistakes; this is known as “hijacking” and is where the program does the work rather than the user. The second option is when Word’s spelling and grammar assessor notifies the user of a mistake, or an unrecognizable and/or perhaps a new word. This results in red or green lines appearing beneath the questionable text. Here the user takes advantage of personal
knowledge and the special features of the program to correct the error; all too often, however, s/he ignores the error completely. As neither of these options significantly expands the user’s knowledge base, we have implemented a third alternative. This is a modified and expanded version of the first, hijacking option. The database we have created alerts the user to the existence of a problem; he or she receives a message indicating the specific nature of the error, e.g. **There is a problem: grammar** or **There is a problem: spelling**. As a consequence, the user is obliged to participate actively in the learning process by selecting one of the options. This alternative is described in greater detail under the heading “Mechanical Elements”. The boilerplate provides assistance with all three of the main elements of an academic paper: structural, methodological and mechanical.

**Structural Elements**

The tailored structural components incorporated in the boilerplate are requirements for generic and other topic-specific essays, e.g. the introduction, aim, method, summary, and references. Among the more specific structural items are a primary/secondary material review, a survey of previous research/theoretical background, an analysis and discussion of results, a summary and conclusion, and appendixes. Each of these elements is incorporated with the correct font and style.

One important feature is the differentiation between essay content and boilerplate instructions. Content is visible as black text, while blue text always denotes instructions to be removed before the final submission of the thesis, as illustrated in the instructions in Image 1. All items are pre-set for each essay element. The boilerplate takes advantage of the simplistic low-level function known as “choose, highlight and click” when selecting the appropriate style. The boilerplate also incorporates guidelines on how to express the correct information in a suitably formal style, as seen in Images 2 and 3. These guidelines are also important in creating papers that are consistent in structure and appearance, giving teachers and examiners papers that are more easily compared and reviewed for final grading.

**Image1: Boilerplate Instructions**

Boilerplate Instructions

1) This Boilerplate is created specifically for the English level-IV students and is formatted to comply with their essay instructions.

2) All formatting has been pre-styled to be used specifically with WORD 2003, please do not change it.

3) Open the FORMAT Tab in WORD 2003, and choose "Styles and Formatting". The options will appear on the right hand side of the Word Document.
An essay’s title page needs to contain visual connections to a professional document (Image 2). The layout is set in such a way that there is a styled space between the title and author information. Differences as to manual line- and paragraph breaks are also visible. By using a dynamic table of contents (Image 3), the boilerplate helps the user to keep track of all changes related to page numbers and chapters, multiple sub-chapters, references, and appendixes. Where necessary, the dynamic table of contents may be edited to show more than five levels of headings, as well as table and image captions.
The user must normally list and keep track of different data. The most widely accepted methods are bulleted lists and numbered/alphabetical lists. The bulleted list is used for generic points, while numbered/alphabetical lists are employed where sub-sections must be included. As illustrated in Image 4, the boilerplate informs students about how to use bullets and/or numbering data. Image 5 shows how students should format tables.

Image 4: Examples of Numbered and Bulleted Lists

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Lists-Numbered – example</th>
<th>Lists-Bulleted - example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2. Lorem ipsum dolors</td>
<td>• Lorem ipsum dolors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.1. Lorem ipsum dolors</td>
<td>• Lorem ipsum dolors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Lorem ipsum dolors</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Lorem ipsum dolors</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.1. Lorem ipsum dolors</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.1.1. Lorem ipsum dolors</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.1.1.1. Lorem ipsum dolors</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Lorem ipsum dolors</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Methodological Elements

Methodological models relate specifically to the lines along which the essay’s particular investigation will be conducted, and the criteria for analysis of the selected material. The instructions in the boilerplate explain how to define theoretical terminology and abbreviations, and how to refer to research of relevance to their project (Images 6, 7, 8, 9 and 10). Students are instructed to specify the method of investigation employed in the study, e.g. interviews, questionnaires, observation etc. The description of the method should be sufficiently detailed that it is possible for others to replicate the study. Students must also justify their choice of method(s). The instructions in the boilerplate emphasize the importance of referring to secondary sources on research methods as a means of validating the choice of method.

As students work on each section, they reflect on what is to be included/excluded, the style in which the relevant information is expressed, and the level of detail required for each part. Incorporating specific methodological instructions in the boilerplate itself means that they are always on hand, as printed instructions may become lost during the writing process. Only when the tasks have been completed are they deleted.

Image 6: Student Guideline Examples

1. Introduction

Area of study, simply and clearly expressed. A brief introduction to the background of the problem investigated so that the reader understands the topic of the essay, and why this is relevant. **Length:** maximum one page.
1.3 Method

How you will deal with your material, i.e. lines of investigation, and analytical criteria. Define unfamiliar theoretical terminology. Explain abbreviations. Refer to other researcher’s methods of significance to your own study. Your method description should be clear and logical so that your study can be replicated. Where observations, interviews, and questionnaires are used, describe these in detail, and justify your choice of method. Refer to secondary sources on research methods to validate your choice.

The length is determined by the amount of detail to cover the above stated criteria.

3. Analysis and Discussion

This is the major part of your thesis. Here you present your results, analyze and discuss them, and draw conclusions on the basic problem investigated. This section requires careful structuring and the use of sub-headings. Pay attention to the classification of your material in order to make it comprehensible to the reader. Include tables and/or figures where relevant. Always comment on tables, figures, and examples. Refer to these by number as opposed to their title.

Support your statements by referring to either your own data or the secondary sources discussed in the theoretical background – or both!

This part may be split into two sections: results/analysis, and a discussion section. It is also possible to combine the two sections, depending on your choice of topic and/or method. Often when a qualitative method is used (as is likely in your essay), the sections are combined so that analysis and discussion are intertwined.
2.1 Previous Research

A brief synopsis of previous research within your chosen field indicating the relevance to your investigation. Previous research may refer to different countries, and even time periods.


References


Mechanical Elements

The mechanical elements in the boilerplate that use MS Word’s built-in options are two-fold. Firstly, the user is notified by MS Word’s built-in grammar and spelling evaluators. This results in green or red lines appearing underneath the text or phrases that the program document identifies as problematical. For further information, the user right-clicks on the questionable word and receives advice. This information indicates the problem and/or suggests the corrections (Image 11) available to the user, who must then decide on the best solution; all too often, however, the user disregards the opportunity completely.
Tables A, B, C, and D show four different versions of how the hijacking option is used respectively. Row 1 in these tables identifies a typical writing mistake. Row 2 shows the generic hijack that MS Word performs automatically to correct the mistake. Row 3 illustrates the change we have generated. As can be seen, the writer receives this text instead of row 2, and must correct it. This then forces him or her to take an active part in the learning process by interacting with the program. Table D constitutes a special case: starting a sentence with a conjunction, in this case and, is unacceptable in English except in rare cases. While Microsoft Word does not consider the text incorrect, and consequently does not automatically correct it, we note the problem and have added our hijack to assist the student, who must then use his or her own knowledge to make the appropriate decision.
Table A: Correcting Grammar

1. Research last year is very rewarding.
2. Research last year was very rewarding.
3. Research last year **GRAMMAR CHECK – Verb Tense** very rewarding.

Table B: Correcting Spelling

1. The area of linguistics is linked to communication and language.
2. The area of linguistics is linked to communication and language.
3. The area of **SPELLING CHECK - Word** is linked to communication and language.

Table C: Contraction Usage

1. The main ideas behind this proposal can’t be fathomed.
2. The main ideas behind this proposal cannot be fathomed.
3. The main ideas behind this proposal **SPELLING CHECK – Do Not Use Contractions** be fathomed.

Table D: Starting a Sentence with a Conjunction

1. And all the work is completely documented.
2. And all the work is completely documented.
3. **Do not start a sentence with a conjunction** all the work is completely documented.

By adding specific components of common errors and follow-up notices, it is hoped that the standard of the user's language will improve. Images 12 and 14 are screenshots from MS Word showing two writing problems. Images 13 and 15 are screenshots that show our modified “hijacking option” and the replaced content. The writer cannot ignore the notice as it requires an active response to correct the error.

Image 12: Grammatical Error - “And”

Each test should be tailored to the special needs of the test group; otherwise, the test would fail to reach its specific goal. And although both are entrance tests for an introductory course to Renaissance literature, there is a final need to consider the various learner characteristics.

Image 13: “And” Correction Notice

Each test should be tailored to the special needs of the test group; otherwise, the test would fail to reach its specific goal ***DO NOT START A SENTENCE WITH A CONJUNCTION*** although both are entrance tests for an introductory course to Renaissance literature, there is a final need to consider the various learner characteristics.
**Image 14: Stylistic Error: Contraction Usage - last line, shouldn't**

Discussing second language acquisition can require specifying your different criteria in a logical order. When using multiple forms of any words that then need explaining, remember that they shouldn’t be split into non-typical categories.

**Image 15: Contraction Correction Notice**

Discussing second language acquisition can require specifying your different criteria in a logical order. When using multiple forms of any words that then need explaining, remember that they *****CONTRACTION USE: DO NOT USE A CONTRACTION IN AN ACADEMIC PAPER***** be split into non-typical categories.

To correct any of the above notices, all the writer has to do is “erase” the text, make the necessary corrections, and save all changes.
The Boilerplate in Practice

The spring term of 2011 saw over 25 students writing level-IV essays. The following examples are taken from the same student's essay, illustrating a few of the items that the boilerplate corrected (the corrections are part of the database specifically designed for level-IV essays).

Image 16 shows the original introduction for the first draft; Image 17 is the final version, which is more coherent and properly formatted, i.e. justified margins, correct right-hand margins and break instructions for a more professional looking document.

Image 16: Original Introduction

Introduction
Most people will not give a second thought to the fact that English is a global language.
People are strongly motivated to learn English since it functions as an information carrier that put you in contact with more people than any other languages (Crystal, 1997: 3). Among various linguistic items vocabulary has been considered by many\(^1\) as essential in language teaching and learning. However, the question as to how to teach vocabulary is a debatable one.
Both most popular teaching approaches, namely behaviourism and innatism, are under challenge. The behaviourist approach has been accused of mechanical and boring (Abdel-Rahman Abu-Melhim, 2009:43). Similarly, innatism which has obtained support from many\(^2\) has been questioned by some researchers\(^3\), demonstrating that the method fails to develop learners’ complete language knowledge. In attempting to minimize the disadvantages of two methods, others\(^4\) suggest an idea of combining the two methods. One of the most influential approaches that can cope with the aforementioned drawbacks is task-based language teaching.

Task-based language teaching has enjoyed growing popularity over the past two decades (Kris Van den Branden, 2006: 1). This comment was reflected in the number of publications\(^5\) concerning task-based language learning and teaching. Task-based teaching is a departure from the traditional rigid and teacher-controlled language instruction, emphasizing the role and needs of language learners. One of the most prominent advantages\(^6\) of the method lies in its ability to integrate meaning-focused communication with form-focused instructions.
A comparison of the two versions, i.e. before and after corrections were made, demonstrates that eight different kinds of error were identified: absence of the genitive apostrophe in the noun pupil (5 cases); omission of the definite article (4 cases); non-colloquial usage (1 case); concord error (1 case); poor word choice (1 case); addition of a comma (1 case), the removal of a comma (1 case) and the addition of a full-stop (1 case).
Word meaning retention
Focusing on the tasks' short term effectiveness in understanding word meanings, the analysis in the previous section analyzed pupils' performance on the immediate post-test subsequent to the completion of the two tasks. The result demonstrates that the jigsaw tasks were more effective in promoting pupils' productive vocabulary knowledge, i.e., relatively deep understanding, whereas the information gap task outperformed the jigsaw task in terms of word meaning recognition. In general, unlike with the pre-test, the pupils' performance on the immediate post-test varied considerably. However, as already established, word meaning acquisition is not a one-off experience. Vocabulary acquisition cannot be improved, and various teaching methods become useless if the understanding of word meanings is not stored in a mental lexicon. It is thus very important to investigate task effectiveness in word meaning retention.
Image 20 (from the first draft) expressed results in percentages. This was changed to numbers in Image 21 (in the final version) to comply with the praxis in the remainder of the thesis. Lower-case letters were replaced by capital letters (3 cases). A hyphen was added between ‘newly’ and ‘learned’ (2 cases) and the noun ‘pupil’ was added for the sake of consistency. Finally, the preposition ‘of’ was added after ‘Average’ (1 case).

**Image 20: First Draft Version of Table**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Vocabulary</th>
<th>Pupil A’</th>
<th>Pupil B’</th>
<th>Pupil C’</th>
<th>Pupil D’</th>
<th>Pupil E’</th>
<th>Pupil F’</th>
<th>Pupil G’</th>
<th>Pupil H’</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Newley learned vocabulary</td>
<td>86%</td>
<td>57%</td>
<td>43%</td>
<td>57%</td>
<td>71%</td>
<td>43%</td>
<td>86%</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average newly learned vocabulary/pupil</td>
<td>59%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Image 21: Final Draft Version of Table**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pupils</th>
<th>Pupil A’</th>
<th>Pupil B’</th>
<th>Pupil C’</th>
<th>Pupil D’</th>
<th>Pupil E’</th>
<th>Pupil F’</th>
<th>Pupil G’</th>
<th>Pupil H’</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Vocabulary</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gain</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average of Newly learned vocabulary/pupil</td>
<td>4.1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The final two images, 22 and 23, show the introduction of indentation in the references list, greatly enhancing appearance, clarity and consistency of formatting in terms of font, size, and style.

**Image 22: First Draft References**


- Maria J. de la Fuente “Classroom L2 vocabulary acquisition: investigating the role of pedagogical tasks and form-focused instruction”, *Language Teaching Research* vol.10 no.3 2006, pp. 263-295


- Saskia Kersten, *The Mental Lexicon and Vocabulary Learning*, Germany: Narr Verlag, 2010
Practical Advice for Implementing the Boilerplate in the Classroom

The boilerplate should be introduced to students at a workshop at the very beginning of the writing process, where the basic principles and functions of the tool are demonstrated and discussed. A technical mediator should be present to answer questions and assist students. Each student should have access to a computer and complete a series of tasks/stages in the following order: save the boilerplate correctly, explore and discuss the meaning of different error notifications, explore the options for resolving errors, and discuss and practise implementing the strict formatting guidelines specified in the boilerplate. Depending on the level of the students, additional practice and support may be required.

A practice text should be provided at the workshop, enabling students to experiment with different functions. Once this stage is completed it should be emphasized that students should write their texts directly in the boilerplate. They should be provided with the technical mediator's contact information (the mediator should respond to enquiries within twenty-four hours). A series of follow-up meetings can be arranged where required.

It should be stressed during the workshop that the boilerplate does not interfere with the ‘reviewing function’ (“granska”) in Word.

Concluding Remarks

The Boilerplate on trial at Kristianstad University is a significant advance on currently available templates found in text editing programs: it offers additional functions tailored to the specific needs of a discipline or course, and requires minimum input by students and teachers. It can be extended and adapted as new needs or problems arise. As students suggest additions to the boilerplate, the latter becomes part of an ongoing learning process for students and teachers alike. The boilerplate can be used at all levels and within all programs where students are required to write in English. It can also be used by teachers wishing to publish articles in international journals.

References


Ellis, Rod, “Non-reciprocal tasks, comprehension and second language acquisition”, in Researching Pedagogic Tasks: Second Language Learning, Teaching and Testing, Martin Bygate, Peter Skehan and Merrill Swain (eds), Edinburgh Gate: Pearson Education.

Ellis Rod (2003), Task-based language learning and teaching, Oxford: Oxford University Press.


**Summary**

The Boilerplate is a template containing guidelines, suggestions, and solutions that help students, teachers and researchers to write papers, reports, essays and theses in English. It helps improve the structure of a text, identifies language, spelling and punctuation problems and suggests stylistic improvements. Unlike the system already available in Microsoft Word, it is tailored to specific subjects and types of document. It can be updated on a regular basis, is user-friendly as well as time-saving (once the tool is mastered) and is inexpensive to produce.

The Boilerplate is a significant advance on currently available text editing programs: it offers additional functions tailored to the specific needs of a discipline or course, and requires minimum input by students and teachers. It can be extended and adapted according to the user's needs. As students suggest additions to the boilerplate, the latter becomes part of an ongoing learning process for students and teachers alike. The Boilerplate is also very useful for researchers publishing in English and can be adapted to all disciplines.

**Reference List**


All images are taken from the “Boiler Plate Level-IV-Spring 2011”.

**Suggestions for further reading**


Swales and Feak (2004). *Academic Writing for Graduate Students: Essential Tasks and Skills* (2nd ed.).