Academic writing

Academic writing is generally quite formal, objective (impersonal) and technical. It is formal by avoiding casual or conversational language, such as contractions or informal vocabulary. It is impersonal and objective by avoiding direct reference to people or feelings, and instead emphasising objects, facts and ideas. It is technical by using vocabulary specific to the discipline.

Different disciplines also have different styles and structures of writing. For example, some disciplines, such as in the humanities, expect longer paragraphs, which include topic sentences to show how your argument is structured. Other disciplines, for example in the sciences, expect short paragraphs, with no topic sentences, which are denser in factual information.

To be a good academic writer, you will need to learn the specific styles and structures for your discipline, as well as for each individual writing task. Some ways to do this are to:

- ask for more information from your lecturer/supervisor/tutor
- study the writing style of the academic articles in the most prestigious journals in your discipline
- look at the successful writing by other students in your subject area.

Formal language

You can make your writing more formal through the vocabulary that you use. For academic writing:

- choose formal instead of informal vocabulary. For example, ‘somewhat’ is more formal than ‘a bit’, ‘insufficient’ is more formal than ‘not enough’.
- avoid contractions. For example, use ‘did not’ rather than ‘didn’t’.
- avoid emotional language. For example, instead of strong words such as ‘wonderful’ or ‘terrible’, use more moderate words such as ‘helpful’ or ‘problematic’.
- instead of using absolute positives and negatives, such as ‘proof’ or ‘wrong’, use more cautious evaluations, such as ‘strong evidence’ or ‘less convincing’.

Objective language

Although academic writing usually requires you to be objective and impersonal (not mentioning personal feelings), often you may still have to present your opinion. For example, you may need to:

- interpret findings
- evaluate a theory
- develop an argument
- critique the work of others.

To express your point of view and still write in an objective style, you can use the following strategies.

- More information around in the sentence to emphasise things and ideas, instead of people and feelings. For example, instead of writing 'I believe the model is valid, based on these findings', write 'These findings indicate that the model is valid'.
- Avoid evaluative words that are based on non-technical judgements and feelings. For example, use 'valid' or 'did not demonstrate' instead of 'amazing' or 'disappointment'.
- Avoid intense or emotional evaluative language. For example, instead of writing 'Parents who smoke are obviously abusing their children', write 'Secondhand smoke has some harmful effects on children's health'.
- Use modality to show caution about your views, or to allow room for others to disagree. For example, instead of writing 'I think secondhand smoke causes cancer', write 'There is evidence to support the possibility that secondhand smoke increases the risk of cancer'.
- Find authoritative sources, such as authors, researchers and theorists in books or articles, who support your point of view, and refer to them in your writing. For example, instead of writing 'Language is, in my view, clearly something social', write 'As Halliday (1973) argues, language is intrinsically social'.

Different disciplines often have quite different expectations about how objective or subjective your writing can be. For example, in some fields it is fine to use first person, such as 'my view is that…', while in other fields this is not acceptable. You should look at the convention used in published articles in your discipline area, and check with your lecturer.

Technical language

As well as using formal language, you also need to write technically. This means that you need to develop a large vocabulary for the concepts specific to the discipline or specialisation you're writing for. To do this, take note of terminology used by your lecturer and tutor, as well as in your readings.

Be careful about the meaning of technical terms. Often the same word has a different meaning in another discipline. For example, 'discourse' is a technical term used in multiple disciplines with different meanings.

Make sure you also understand and use the key categories and relationships in your discipline, that is, the way information and ideas are organised into groups. For example, in the discipline of Law, law is separated into two types: common law and statute law. Knowing these distinctions will help you structure your writing and make it more technical and analytical.

Resources

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Types of academic writing

The four main types of academic writing are descriptive, analytical, persuasive and critical. Each of these types of writing has specific language features and purposes.

In many academic texts you will need to use more than one type. For example, in an empirical thesis:

- you will use critical writing in the literature review to show where there is a gap or opportunity in the existing research
- the methods section will be mostly descriptive to summarise the methods used to collect and analyse information
- the results section will be mostly descriptive and analytical as you report on the data you collected
- the discussion section is more analytical, as you relate your findings back to your research questions, and also persuasive, as you propose your interpretations of the findings.

Descriptive

The simplest type of academic writing is descriptive. Its purpose is to provide facts or information. An example would be a summary of an article or a report of the results of an experiment.

The kinds of instructions for a purely descriptive assignment include: 'identify', 'report', 'record', 'summarise' and 'define'.

Analytical

It's rare for a university-level text to be purely descriptive. Most academic writing is also analytical. Analytical writing includes descriptive writing, but also requires you to re-organise the facts and information you describe into categories, groups, parts, types or relationships.

Sometimes, these categories or relationships are already part of the discipline, while in other cases you will create them specifically for your text. If you're comparing two theories, you might break your comparison into several parts, for example: how each theory deals with social context, how each theory deals with language learning, and how each theory can be used in practice.

The kinds of instructions for an analytical assignment include: 'analyse', 'compare', 'contrast', 'relate', and 'examine'.

To make your writing more analytical:

- spend plenty of time planning. Brainstorm the facts and ideas, and try different ways of grouping them, according to patterns, parts, similarities and differences. You could use colour-coding, flow charts, tree diagrams or tables.
- create a name for the relationships and categories you find. For example, advantages and disadvantages.
- build each section and paragraph around one of the analytical categories.
- make the structure of your paper clear to your reader, by using topic sentences and a clear introduction.

Persuasive

In most academic writing, you are required to go at least one step further than analytical writing, to persuasive writing. Persuasive writing has all the features of analytical writing (that is, information plus re-organising the information), with the addition of your own point of view. Most essays are persuasive, and there is a persuasive element in at least the discussion and conclusion of a research article.

Points of view in academic writing can include an argument, recommendation, interpretation of findings or evaluation of the work of others. In persuasive writing, each claim you make needs to be supported by some evidence, for example a reference to research findings or published sources.

The kinds of instructions for a persuasive assignment include: 'argue', 'evaluate', 'discuss', and 'take a position'.

To help reach your own point of view on the facts or ideas:

- read some other researchers' points of view on the topic. Who do you feel is the most convincing?
- look for patterns in the data or references. Where is the evidence strongest?
- list several different interpretations. What are the real-life implications of each one? Which ones are likely to be most useful or beneficial? Which ones have some problems?
- discuss the facts and ideas with someone else. Do you agree with their point of view?

To develop your argument:

- list the different reasons for your point of view
- think about the different types and sources of evidence which you can use to support your point of view
- consider different ways that your point of view is similar to, and different from, the points of view of other researchers
- look for various ways to break your point of view into parts. For example, cost effectiveness, environmental sustainability, scope of real-world application.

To present your argument, make sure:

- your text develops a coherent argument where all the individual claims work together to support your overall point of view
- your reasoning for each claim is clear to the reader
- your assumptions are valid
- you have evidence for every claim you make
- you use evidence that is convincing and directly relevant.

Critical

Critical writing is common for research, postgraduate and advanced undergraduate writing. It has all the features of persuasive writing, with the added feature of at least one other point of

view. While persuasive writing requires you to have your own point of view on an issue or topic, critical writing requires you to consider at least two points of view, including your own.

For example, you may explain a researcher's interpretation or argument and then evaluate the merits of the argument, or give your own alternative interpretation.

Examples of critical writing assignments include a critique of a journal article, or a literature review that identifies the strengths and weaknesses of existing research. The kinds of instructions for critical writing include: 'critique', 'debate', 'disagree' and 'evaluate'.

You need to:

- accurately summarise all or part of the work. This could include identifying the main interpretations, assumptions or methodology.
- have an opinion about the work. Appropriate types of opinion could include pointing out some problems with it, proposing an alternative approach that would be better, and/or defending the work against the critiques of others.
- provide evidence for your point of view. Depending on the specific assignment and the discipline, different types of evidence may be appropriate, such as logical reasoning, reference to authoritative sources and/or research data.

Critical writing requires strong writing skills. You need to thoroughly understand the topic and the issues. You need to develop an essay structure and paragraph structure that allows you to analyse different interpretations and develop your own argument, supported by evidence.

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Planning your writing

There are two main approaches to organising and analysing information for academic writing.

- The planning approach: spend a lot of time on different types of planning before you begin writing. Only start writing when you know what you will write in each paragraph.
- The drafting approach: start writing early, while you are still developing your ideas. Write many drafts and gradually re-organise your text until your ideas are clear and your paragraphs are well structured.

Both of these approaches can be successful. However, if your writing needs to be more logical, clear or analytical, focus more on your planning. Creating a good plan is a very positive early step towards writing a good assignment.

Know what’s expected

While some types of written work are the same in many disciplines, such as essays, there are also some kinds that only belong to a particular discipline. Sometimes even in the same

discipline area, different lecturers will have different expectations about a particular type of assignment.

It's therefore important you understand exactly what type of assignment you're expected to write. For example, it could be an essay, report, case study, reflection or critical review.

You can find out what is expected by looking at key sources of information including:

- written assignment instructions
- grade descriptors, rubrics or marking guides. These list the parts of the assignment, how many marks each part is worth, and/or list the qualities in the assignment that will achieve certain grades.
- advice from your lecturer or tutor
- the unit of study outline
- discussion with other students
- general assignment guidelines prepared by some schools, departments or faculties
- model assignments. Some lecturers, departments or schools keep copies of good assignments done by previous students, as models of the right style and structure
- the resources of the Learning Hub (Academic Language and Learning).

Make a task list

You should identify all the things you need to do to write your paper. This could include:

- a library database search and catalogue search to find relevant journal articles or books
- reading and note-taking
- brainstorming
- analysing data
- planning the structure of your assignment
- drafting
- discussion
- editing and proofreading.

Estimate the time you need for each task and make a realistic plan based on how you work. Some people spend longer reading and analysing before they start writing, while others start writing earlier and write several drafts.

Find out ways to manage your time.

Early planning

Initially capture as many ideas as possible, without worrying about structure. For example:

- carefully read and think about the assignment or task, and its purpose

- brainstorm lists of key words and topics, to give direction to your reading and research
- draw mindmaps, diagrams and flowcharts
- discuss your ideas with someone else
- list all the readings you could use
- read the abstracts for the relevant sources and make notes on how each article could be useful
- for a large task like a thesis or dissertation, use EndNote, or similar software, to save your references and notes.

After this initial planning, you can start working out the structure of your assignment.

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Structuring written work

Some assignments have a standard format, such as lab reports or case studies, and these will normally be explained in your course materials. For other assignments, you will have to come up with your own structure.

Your structure might be guided by:

- the assignment question. For example, it may list topics or use wording such as 'compare and contrast'
- the subject matter itself, which may suggest a structure based on chronology, process or location
- your interpretation of the subject matter. For example, problem/solution, argument/counter-argument or sub-topics in order of importance
- the structure of other texts you've read in your discipline. Look at how the information is organised and sequenced. Make sure you modify the structure to suit your purpose to avoid plagiarism.

Essays

Essays are a very common form of academic writing. Like most of the texts you write at university, all essays have the same basic three-part structure: introduction, main body and conclusion. However, the main body can be structured in many different ways.

To write a good essay:

- know if you're expected to write an analytical, persuasive or critical essay
- clearly structure your main body and paragraphs
- use appropriate referencing

- use academic language.

Reports

Reports generally have the same basic structure as essays, with an introduction, body and conclusion. However, the main body structure can vary widely, as the term ‘report’ is used for many types of texts and purposes in different disciplines.

Find out as much as possible about what type of report is expected.

How to plan your structure

There are many ways to come up with a structure for your work. If you’re not sure how to approach it, try some of the strategies below.

During and after reading your sources, take notes and start thinking about ways to structure the ideas and facts into groups. For example:

- look for similarities, differences, patterns, themes or other ways of grouping and dividing the ideas under headings. This could include advantages, disadvantages, causes, effects, problems, solutions or types of theory
- use coloured highlighters or symbols to tag themes or categories of information in your readings or notes
- cut and paste notes in a document
- physically group your readings or notes into piles.

It’s a good idea to brainstorm a few different ways of structuring your assignment once you have a rough idea of the main issues. Do this in outline form before you start writing – it’s much easier to re-structure an outline than a half-finished essay. For example:

- draw some tree diagrams, mind-maps or flowcharts showing which ideas, facts and references would be included under each heading
- discard ideas that don't fit into your overall purpose, and facts or references that are not useful for what you want to discuss
- if you have a lot of information, such as for a thesis or dissertation, create some tables to show how each theory or reading relates to each heading (this is often called a 'synthesis grid')
- plan the number of paragraphs you need, the topic heading for each one, and dot points for each piece of information and reference needed
- try a few different possible structures until you find the one that works best.

Eventually, you’ll have a plan that is detailed enough for you to start writing. You’ll know which ideas go into each section and, ideally, each paragraph. You will also know where to find evidence for those ideas in your notes and the sources of that evidence.

If you’re having difficulties with the process of planning the structure of your assignment, consider trying a different strategy for grouping and organising your information.

Making the structure clear

Your writing will be clear and logical to read if it's easy to see the structure and how it fits together. You can achieve this in several ways.

- Use the end of the introduction to show the reader what structure to expect.
- Use headings and sub-headings to clearly mark the sections (if these are acceptable for your discipline and assignment type).
- Use topic sentences at the beginning of each paragraph, to show the reader what the main idea is, and to link back to the introduction and/or headings and sub-headings.
- Show the connections between sentences. The beginning of each sentence should link back to the main idea of the paragraph or a previous sentence.
- Use conjunctions and linking words to show the structure of relationships between ideas. Examples of conjunctions include: however, similarly, in contrast, for this reason, as a result and moreover.

Introductions

Most of the types of texts you write for university need to have an introduction. Its purpose is to clearly tell the reader the topic, purpose and structure of the paper.

As a rough guide, an introduction might be between 10 and 20 percent of the length of the whole paper and has three main parts.

1. The most general information, such as background and/or definitions.
2. The core of the introduction, where you show the overall topic, purpose, your point of view, hypotheses and/or research questions (depending on what kind of paper it is).
3. The most specific information, describing the scope and structure of your paper.

If the main body of your paper follows a predictable template, such as the method, results and discussion stages of a report in the sciences, you generally don't need to include a guide to the structure in your introduction.

You should write your introduction after you know both your overall point of view (if it is a persuasive paper) and the whole structure of your paper. You should then revise the introduction when you have completed the main body.

Paragraphs

Most academic writing is structured into paragraphs. It is helpful to think about each paragraph as a mini essay with a three-part structure:

- topic sentence (also known as introductory sentence)
- body of the paragraph
- concluding sentence (necessary for long paragraphs but otherwise optional).

The topic sentence introduces a general overview of the topic and the purpose of the paragraph. Depending on the length of the paragraph, this may be more than one sentence. The topic sentence answers the question 'what's the paragraph about?'.

The body of the paragraph develops this topic. It may elaborate directly on the topic sentence by giving definitions, classifications, explanations, contrasts, examples and evidence.

The final sentence in many, but not all, paragraphs is the concluding sentence. It does not present new information, but often either summarises or comments on the paragraph content. It can also provide a link, by showing how the paragraph links to the topic sentence of the next paragraph. The concluding sentence often answers the question 'so what?', by explaining how this paragraph relates back to the main topic.

You don't have to write all your paragraphs using this structure. For example, there are paragraphs with no topic sentence, or the topic is mentioned near the end of the paragraph. However, this is a clear and common structure that makes it easy for the reader to follow.

Conclusions

The conclusion is closely related to the introduction and is often described as its 'mirror image'. This means that if the introduction begins with general information and ends with specific information, the conclusion moves in the opposite direction.

The conclusion usually:

- begins by briefly summarising the main scope or structure of the paper
- confirms the topic that was given in the introduction. This may take the form of the aims of the paper, a thesis statement (point of view) or a research question/hypothesis and its answer/outcome.
- ends with a more general statement about how this topic relates to its context. This may take the form of an evaluation of the importance of the topic, implications for future research or a recommendation about theory or practice.

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Grammar, spelling and vocabulary

It's important to use correct grammar, spelling and technical vocabulary in your university work. This will often be part of the marking criteria for your assignments.

If you're not confident in your grammar or spelling skills, the Learning Hub (Academic Language and Learning) has a number of online resources such as the Write Site.

You can also attend a Learning Hub (Academic Language and Learning) workshop where you can learn strategies for paying close attention to grammar, proofreading or editing your work.

Building your technical vocabulary specific to your discipline takes time. You can improve your vocabulary by looking up technical words you come across in your readings or in class and noting down what they mean and how they're used. You should also look out for frequently occurring academic words, for example: 'analysis', 'aspect', 'factor' and 'discourse'.

However, it's important to read first for the general meaning of the whole text. Looking up every new word will make it much slower and harder to understand.

If English is not your first language, there are English language courses, both on campus (Centre for English Teaching) and off campus, as well as many books and online resources for learning more about English grammar. The best way to improve your use of English grammar is to spend as many hours each day as possible in English conversation. However, remember that formal written English is different to conversational English.

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Editing and proofreading

Once you've written your assignment, it's important to edit and proofread your work.

Depending on the type of assignment and your process of writing, editing may involve:

- removing or adding text to meet the word limit
- making your sentences clearer and more concise
- restructuring paragraphs or sections
- making sure your ideas flow logically
- making sure you've provided enough background information
- adding in subheadings or sentences to clearly signpost the structure.

Once you've edited your work, proofread it. This involves checking spelling, grammar and references.

Help editing and proofreading

There is no editing or proofreading service at the University. However, you can develop techniques to edit and proofread your own work. The Learning Hub (Academic Language and Learning) runs workshops and offers individual consultations where you can discuss ways to improve your writing. Bring an assignment that has already been marked as a sample of your work, and the Learning Hub (Academic Language and Learning) lecturer can identify any problems that you have and advise you on how to avoid them in the future.

Unmarked work that you intend to submit cannot be edited by a Learning Hub (Academic Language and Learning) lecturer. At most, the lecturer can give you general feedback based on reading one or two pages.

If you are a postgraduate research student, you can ask the Learning Hub (Academic Language and Learning) for feedback on parts of your thesis. This would include advice on structure, clarity, expression, or aspects of grammar but does not involve editing and proofreading. If you want to use this service, begin well before your submission date, as it aims to help you develop writing skills, not to fix up mistakes.

If you're a postgraduate student and willing to spend money, a list of private proofreaders and editors can be obtained via Sydney University Postgraduate Representative Association (SUPRA). You may also find proofreaders who advertise their services on noticeboards around the University.

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Evidence, plagiarism and referencing

Using evidence

Many types of university assignments are persuasive or critical. In these types of texts, you need to provide evidence to support your claims.

Different disciplines use different types of evidence. For example, in arts disciplines, published sources are the main evidence, while science disciplines often use various types of empirical data (such as statistics or other experimental results) as the main evidence.

In addition to finding the right kind of evidence you need to evaluate the quality of evidence - not all pieces of evidence will be equally valuable for you to use. You should consider:

- whether the evidence directly demonstrates support for a claim you are making. For example, does it show that another scholar agrees with your argument, or that results confirm your interpretation?
- the reliability of the evidence. Is it published in a peer-reviewed journal or a book by a reputable publisher? Is the author someone who has expertise and status in the field? Has the data been obtained through a rigorous methodology, using an appropriate sample?
- if it meets the standards for good evidence in your discipline. For example, in some disciplines, such as information technology, sources need to be quite recent, as publications that are two years old may already be out of date. In other disciplines, like philosophy, sources that are more than 200 years old may still be authoritative and relevant.

If you're not sure what type of evidence you should use, or what is good-quality evidence in your discipline, you could start by:

- checking the assignment instructions and any rubrics/marking guide/grade descriptors provided
- asking your lecturer/tutor for more information
- discussing it with other students
- looking at the type of evidence used in the readings for that unit of study.

Plagiarism

Plagiarism is using someone else's work as if it were your own. It is a type of academic dishonesty.

Make sure you're familiar with what is considered plagiarism and what the consequences are.

Avoiding plagiarism

To avoid plagiarism, you need to be aware of what it is, and have good writing skills and referencing knowledge. You need to be able to:

- paraphrase and summarise
- know when to quote a source and when to paraphrase it
- link information from sources with your own ideas
- correctly use referencing conventions.

When you quote a source, you use an extract exactly as it was used in/by the source. You indicate a quote by using quotation marks or indenting the text for long quotes.

When you paraphrase or summarise, you put the author's ideas in your own words. However, you still need to attribute the idea to the author by including a reference.

It's usually better to paraphrase than quote, as it shows a higher level of thinking, understanding and writing skills. To rephrase ideas, you need a large vocabulary of formal and technical words for the subject matter, as well as grammatical flexibility.

To develop your skills in quoting, summarising and paraphrasing, visit the Write Site or attend a Learning Hub (Academic Language and Learning) workshop.

If you have a language background other than English, you can also work on these skills by spending as many hours per day as possible in English conversation. You can also study the vocabulary and grammar patterns used in the books and articles you're reading for your course.

Referencing

In order to avoid plagiarism, you need to acknowledge your sources through referencing.

There are several different referencing conventions, also called citation styles, such as Harvard, American Psychological Association and MLA. The referencing convention you use depends on your discipline.

You should be told which system to use by your lecturer, school, department and/or faculty at the beginning of the year or semester. You will be told either in a set of general guidelines, the outline for the unit of study or in the instructions for a particular assignment. Occasionally, you will be allowed to choose the citation style you prefer, as long as it is consistently used. If you're not sure which system to use, ask your lecturer.

Find out how to reference on the Library website.

If you have a lot of references, you can use software such as EndNote to automatically apply the right format to each reference. EndNote can be downloaded for free from the Library's website. The Library also runs classes on using EndNote.

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