

Academic Writing

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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:
 - ✓ Move 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 'Second hand 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.

The Purpose of Academic Writing

Writers should be clear why they are writing. The most common reasons for writing include:

- to report on a piece of research the writer has conducted
- to answer a question the writer has been given or chosen
- to discuss a subject of common interest and give the writer's view
- to synthesise research done by others on a topic

Features of Academic Writing

Academic writing in English is linear, which means it has one central point or theme with every part contributing to the main line of argument, without digressions or repetitions. Its objective is to inform rather than entertain. As well as this it is in the standard written form of the language. There are ten main features of academic writing that are often discussed. Academic writing is to some extent: complex, formal, objective, explicit, hedged, and responsible. It uses language precisely and accurately. It is also well organised and planned.

Complexity

Written language is relatively more complex than spoken language. Written language has longer words, it is lexically more dense and it has a more varied vocabulary. It uses more noun-based phrases than verb-based phrases. Written texts are shorter and the language has more grammatical complexity, including more subordinate clauses and more passives.

Example:

Spoken	Written
Whenever I'd visited there before, I'd ended up feeling that it would be futile if I tried to do anything more.	Every previous visit had left me with a sense of the futility of further action on my part.
The cities in Switzerland had once been peaceful, but they changed when people became violent.	Violence changed the face of once peaceful Swiss cities.
Because the technology has improved its less risky than it used to be when you install them at the same time, and it doesn't cost so much either.	Improvements in technology have reduced the risks and high costs associated with simultaneous installation.
The people in the colony rejoiced when it was promised that things would change in this way.	Opinion in the colony greeted the promised change with enthusiasm.

Formality

Academic writing is relatively formal. In general this means that in an essay you should avoid colloquial words and expressions.

In general this means in an essay that you should avoid:

- colloquial words and expressions; ""stuff", "a lot of", "thing", "sort of",
- abbreviated forms: "can't", "doesn't", "shouldn't"
- two word verbs: "put off", "bring up"
- sub-headings, numbering and bullet-points in formal essays - but use them in reports.
- asking questions.

Precision

In academic writing, facts and figures are given precisely.

In academic writing you need to be precise when you use information, dates or figures. Do not use "a lot of people" when you can say "50 million people".

For example:

- Chemists had attempted to synthesize quinine for the previous hundred years but all they had achieved was to discover the extreme complexity of the problem.
- The volatile oily liquid beta-chloro-beta-ethyl sulphide was first synthesized in 1854, and in 1887 it was reported to produce blisters if it touched the skin. It was called mustard gas and was used at Ypres in 1917, when it caused many thousands of casualties.
- It is approximately eight inches in length and runs from the urinary bladder, through the prostate gland, under the front of the pelvis, and, passing through the corpus spongiosum, it ends at the tip of the glans penis in an opening called the *urethral meatus*.

Objectivity

- Written language is in general objective rather than personal.
- It has fewer words that refer to the writer or the reader.
- The main emphasis should be on the information that you want to give and the arguments you want to make, rather than you.
- Academic writing tends to use nouns (and adjectives), rather than verbs (and adverbs).
- This is related to the basic nature of academic study and academic writing, in particular.
- Nobody really wants to know what you "think" or "believe".
- They want to know what you have studied and learned and how this has led you to your various conclusions.
- The thoughts and beliefs should be based on your lectures, reading, discussion and research and it is important to make this clear.

Compare these two paragraphs:

- The question of what constitutes "language proficiency" and the nature of its cross-lingual dimensions is also at the core of many hotly debated issues in the areas of bilingual education and second language pedagogy and testing. Researchers have suggested ways of making second language teaching and testing more "communicative" (e.g., Canale and Swain, 1980; Oller, 1979b) on the grounds that a communicative approach better reflects the nature of language proficiency than one which emphasizes the acquisition of discrete language skills.
- We don't really know what language proficiency is but many people have talked about it for a long time. Some researchers have tried to find ways for us to make teaching and testing more communicative because that is how language works. I think that language is something we use for communicating, not an object for us to study and we remember that when we teach and test it.

Which is the most objective?

- In general, avoid words like "I", "me", "myself".
- A reader will normally assume that any idea not referenced is your own. It is therefore unnecessary to make this explicit.

Don't write: "In my opinion, this a very interesting study."

Write: "This is a very interesting study."

- Avoid "you" to refer to the reader or people in general.

Don't write: "You can easily forget how different life was 50 years ago."

Write: "It is easy to forget how difficult life was 50 years ago."

Examples

- Clearly this was far less true of France than ...
- This is where the disagreements and controversies begin ...
- The data indicates that ...
- This is not a view shared by everyone; Jones, for example, claims that ...
- . . .very few people would claim ...
- It is worthwhile at this stage to consider ...
- Of course, more concrete evidence is needed before ...
- Several possibilities emerge ...
- A common solution is ...

Explicitness

- Academic writing is explicit about the relationships in the text.
- It is the responsibility of the writer in English to make it clear to the reader how the various parts of the text are related.
- These connections can be made explicit by the use of different signalling words.

Academic writing is explicit in several ways:

- It is explicit in its signposting of the organisation of the ideas in the text (Biber, Johansson, Leech, Conrad & Finegan, 1999, pp. 880-882). As a writer of academic English, it is your responsibility to make it clear to your reader how various parts of the text are related. These connections can be made explicit by the use of different signalling words.

For example, if you want to tell your reader that your line of argument is going to change, make it clear.

The Bristol 167 was to be Britain's great new advance on American types such as the Lockheed Constellation and Douglas DC-6, which did not have the range to fly the Atlantic non-stop. It was also to be the largest aircraft ever built in Britain. However, even by the end of the war, the design had run into serious difficulties.

If you think that one sentence gives reasons for something in another sentence, make it explicit.

While an earlier generation of writers had noted this feature of the period, it was not until the recent work of Cairncross that the significance of this outflow was realized. Partly this was because the current account deficit appears much smaller in current (1980s) data than it was thought to be by contemporaries.

If you think two ideas are almost the same, say so.

Marx referred throughout his work to other systems than the capitalist system, especially those which he knew from the history of Europe to have preceded capitalism; systems such as feudalism, where the relation of production was characterized by the personal relation of the feudal lord and his serf and a relation of subordination which came from the lord's control of the land. Similarly, Marx was interested in slavery and in the classical Indian and Chinese social systems, or in those systems where the ties of local community are all important.

If you intend your sentence to give extra information, make it clear.

He is born into a family, he marries into a family, and he becomes the husband and father of his own family. In addition, he has a definite place of origin and more relatives than he knows what to do with, and he receives a rudimentary education at the Canadian Mission School.

If you are giving examples, do it explicitly.

This has sometimes led to disputes between religious and secular clergy, between orders and bishops. For example, in the Northern context, the previous bishop of Down and Connor, Dr Philbin, refused for most of his period of leadership in Belfast to have Jesuits visiting or residing in his diocese.

It is explicit in its acknowledgment of the sources of the ideas in the text.

- If you know the source of the ideas you are presenting, acknowledge it
- Do THIS in academic writing

McGreil (1977: 363-408) has shown that though Dubliners find the English more acceptable than the Northern Irish, Dubliners still seek a solution to the Northern problem within an all-Ireland state.

Accuracy

Academic writing uses vocabulary accurately. Most subjects have words with narrow specific meanings. Linguistics distinguishes clearly between "phonetics" and "phonemics"; general English does not.

- In academic writing you need to be accurate in your use of vocabulary. Do not confuse, for example, "phonetics" and "phonology" or "grammar" with "syntax".
- Choose the correct word, for example, "meeting", "assembly", "gathering" or "conference".
- Or from: "money", "cash", "currency", "capital" or "funds".

Hedging

- In any kind of academic writing you do, it is necessary to make decisions about your stance on a particular subject, or the strength of the claims you are making. Different subjects prefer to do this in different ways.
- A technique common in certain kinds of academic writing is known by linguists as a 'hedge'.
- It is often believed that academic writing, particularly scientific writing, is factual, simply to convey facts and information. However it is now recognised that an important feature of academic writing is the concept of cautious language, often called "hedging" or "vague language". In other words, it is necessary to make decisions about your stance on a particular subject, or the strength of the claims you are making. Different subjects prefer to do this in different ways.

Language used in hedging:

- | | | |
|----|-----------------------|--|
| 1. | Introductory verbs: | e.g. seem, tend, look like, appear to be, think, believe, doubt, be sure, indicate, suggest |
| 2. | Certain lexical verbs | e.g. believe, assume, suggest |
| 3. | Certain modal verbs: | e.g. will, must, would, may, might, could |
| 4. | Adverbs of frequency | e.g. often, sometimes, usually |
| 4. | Modal adverbs | e.g. certainly, definitely, clearly, probably, possibly, perhaps, conceivably, |
| 5. | Modal adjectives | e.g. certain, definite, clear, probable, possible |
| 6. | Modal nouns | e.g. assumption, possibility, probability |
| 7. | That clauses | e.g. It could be the case that .
e.g. It might be suggested that .
e.g. There is every hope that . |
| 8. | To-clause + adjective | e.g. It may be possible to obtain .
e.g. It is important to develop .
e.g. It is useful to study . |

EXAMPLE

Compare the following:

- It may be said that the commitment to some of the social and economic concepts was less strong than it is now.
The commitment to some of the social and economic concepts was less strong than it is now.
- The lives they chose may seem overly ascetic and self-denying to most women today.
The lives they chose seem overly ascetic and self-denying to most women today.
- Weismann suggested that animals become old because, if they did not, there could be no successive replacement of individuals and hence no evolution.
Weismann proved that animals become old because, if they did not, there could be no successive replacement of individuals and hence no evolution.
- Yet often it cannot have been the case that a recalcitrant trustee remained in possession of the property entrusted to him.
Yet a recalcitrant trustee did not remain in possession of the property entrusted to him.

EXAMPLE

Compare the following:

- Recent work on the religious demography of Northern Ireland indicates a separating out of protestant and catholic, with the catholic population drifting westwards and vice versa.
Recent work on the religious demography of Northern Ireland shows a separating out of protestant and catholic, with the catholic population drifting westwards and vice versa.
- By analogy, it may be possible to walk from one point in hilly country to another by a path which is always level or uphill, and yet a straight line between the points would cross a valley.
By analogy, one can walk from one point in hilly country to another by a path which is always level or uphill, and yet a straight line between the points would cross a valley.
- There are certainly cases where this would seem to have been the only possible method of transmission.
There are cases where this would have been the only possible method of transmission.
- Nowadays the urinary symptoms seem to be of a lesser order.
Nowadays the urinary symptoms are of a lesser order.

Responsibility

- In academic writing you must be responsible for, and must be able to provide evidence and justification for, any claims you make. You are also responsible for demonstrating an understanding of any source texts you use.
- In academic writing you are responsible for demonstrating an understanding of the source text. You must also be responsible for, and must be able to provide evidence and justification for, any claims you make.
- This is done by [paraphrasing and summarising](#) what you read and acknowledging the source of this information or ideas by a system of [citation](#).

Organisation

- Academic writing is well organised. It flows easily from one section to the next in a logical fashion. A good place to start is the genre of your text. Once you have decided on the genre, the structure is easily determined.
- Genres are defined by their purpose, their audience and their structure. Looking at typical structures can help you with your organisation.

- The following genres are common in higher education.

Essays

Reports

Case Studies

Research proposals

Book reviews

Brief research reports

Literature reviews

Reflective writing

Introductions

Research methods

Research results

Research discussions

Writing conclusions

Research abstracts

Research dissertations & theses

Planning

- Academic writing is well planned. It usually takes place after research and evaluation, according to a specific purpose and plan.

- The following procedure is typical when writing an extended essay or assignment.

	Task
1.	Read the question or brief and understand what you are required to do. Think about the subject, the purpose and the audience.
2.	Think about what you know about the subject. Write it down in some way.
3.	Go to the library or internet and find relevant books, articles or websites.
4.	Find the books on your reading list - if you have one - and study them.
5.	Make notes on these books and articles. Record full details of the materials you use.
6.	Organise your piece of work.
7.	Type or write your first draft.
8.	Discuss your first draft informally with friends, other members of your class and your lecturer if possible.
9.	Revise your first draft, bearing in mind any comments that were made in your discussions. Go back to 2. if necessary. Produce your second draft.
10.	Proofread your draft.
11.	Produce a final typed version.
12.	Check everything.

Characteristics of Academic Writing

Characteristic	Dos	Don'ts	Examples
Clear and precise language	Use simple, direct and specific language that accurately focuses on facts, evidence, and logical reasoning.	Do not use vague, complex or ambiguous language that may confuse or mislead readers.	Don't: The results of this study are very interesting and important. Do: This study reveals that X has a positive effect on Y in Z context.
Formal and objective language	Use formal, objective language. Maintain a neutral tone, one that is authoritative and unbiased, reinforcing the credibility of the research presented.	Do not use emoticons, slang, contractions, or abbreviations that may sound casual or too subjective for scholarly audiences.	Don't: The study was a flop. We didn't get any useful data. Do: The experiment failed to produce any valid, reliable data.
Evidence and citations	Use evidence-based data to support claims. This can be drawn from credible sources like research studies, books, journals, and expert opinions that can prove the validity of your findings.	Do not rely on your own opinions or assumptions without providing proper sources or references that can verify or challenge your research findings.	Don't: Many people believe that climate change is a hoax. Do: According to a survey conducted by Pew Research Center in 2019, 16% of Americans think that there is no evidence for global warming.
Original, authentic well-presented content	Use original and authentic content that reflects your own research and contribution to your field. It should be free of errors in grammar, punctuation, and spelling.	Do not use other's content without referencing the source.	Don't: In this study, I will argue that bees are vital for nature. (This statement is from: https://www.unep.org/news-and-stories/story/why-bees-are-essential-people-and-planet) Do: As the UNEP 2019 IPBES report reveals, bees are essential to people and the planet .

Dos:

- **Use evidence and citations:** Academic writing relies on research and evidence to support arguments. Referencing credible sources strengthens the validity and reliability of the work.
- **Maintain objectivity:** Present ideas and arguments objectively, without personal biases or opinions. The focus should be on factual information and logical analysis.
- **Structure your writing:** Follow a clear structure, including an introduction, body paragraphs, and a conclusion. Each section should have a distinct purpose and contribute to the coherence of the paper.
- **Develop a strong thesis statement:** Write a clear and concise thesis statement that states the main argument and guides the entire paper.
- **Edit and proofread:** Academic writing demands accuracy and precision. Carefully edit and proofread your work to eliminate errors in grammar, spelling, and punctuation.

Don'ts:

- **Avoid informal language:** Colloquialisms, slang, and abbreviations are best avoided in academic writing. It is essential to maintain a formal and professional tone at all times.
- **Steer clear of vague language:** Be specific and precise in your language, avoiding ambiguous terms or generalizations that could weaken the impact of your argument.
- **Don't rely on personal anecdotes:** Academic writing should be based on research and evidence, rather than personal experiences or anecdotes.
- **Avoid plagiarism:** Properly acknowledge and accurately cite all sources used in your work to avoid charges of plagiarism. Plagiarism is considered highly unethical in academic writing and can affect your reputation and credibility as a researcher.
- **Don't overlook coherence and cohesion:** Ensure that your ideas flow logically and coherently throughout the paper. Use appropriate transitional phrases and clear connections between sentences and paragraphs to maintain a smooth reading experience.

Thank You