

Academic Writing Style

From the Skills Team, University of Hull

General introduction

All students, both undergraduates and postgraduates, are expected to write in an “academic style”, but what does this mean? Different departments probably have slightly different ideas on the matter, but there are some basic approaches to academic writing on which all would agree. It is these basics that this leaflet first aims to cover. It then includes a number of more detailed practical tips, grouped under headings, which should help you to develop a way of writing that could be called “academic”.

Everyone has their own, individual style of writing but we would probably all recognise that we write in different ways in different circumstances. For example, when writing notes for your own use, you will use a style that probably suits you alone - you may even make up your own abbreviations that no one else would understand. This does not matter as you are going to be the only reader! It does not matter if they do not make sense to others. However, when writing a formal essay or dissertation that others are going to read, the situation is very different. What you write has to be easily understood by the reader - who is probably also going to be the marker. Also, certain conventions – ways of writing - have to be understood and then followed.

10 basic approaches:

1 You can use the **academic books** and journals you read as **models to imitate**. As a student, you will be spending a great deal of time reading. The reading materials will probably be written in the type of style that you are expected to use. Although you will usually read to find information, it could be useful occasionally to read to *analyse* the writing itself. Ask yourself questions about it, such as how has the paragraph been structured or why particular words or expressions have been used.

Look at the
medium not the
message

2 As you write, it may be useful to consider whether what you are writing **sounds** as if it could be in an **academic** book. If it does, that’s a good sign! If it sounds more like a written version of a chat with a friend, you will need to revise what you have written. Some of the suggestions in the tips below will help you to do this.

3 **Think about your readers.** Your work will be read by your tutor(s) or supervisor. Does it express your ideas with **clarity**? Remember that tutors will have many assignments to read; make their work easier by writing as clearly as possible. It will benefit you and them!

4 Academic writing points out **limitations**. Expressions such as “For the purpose of this essay, the following limited definition will be used: ...” or “The length of this essay means that only a limited number of examples can be discussed...” can be very useful to show you are aware of limitations in your writing.

5 Academic writing tends to be **impersonal, objective** and **cautious**, avoiding sweeping statements or generalisations. (Some ways of remaining impersonal and sounding cautious are covered in the “tips” below.)

6 It is most important that you *always* make sure you back up everything you say with **evidence** from a **reliable source**, unless it can be considered ‘common knowledge’. (See the “Tips” section on “Referencing”.) This means you need to carry out **research** through appropriate reading. Even if you are writing a reflective assignment where you are drawing on your own experiences you need to provide evidence or justification for what you are saying. Whatever sources you have used (books, websites, journals etc.) they have to be accurately referenced. (See point 10 below.)

7 When you can, it is important to include examples of ideas that disagree with what you are saying, as well as ones that support it. This will give your work **‘balance’** and show that you have read widely and thought about the subject from different angles.

8 You write essays to show your **understanding** of a subject. However, use your **common sense** when giving explanations of concepts etc. It might be necessary at 1st year undergraduate level to prove to your reader that you do have a sound understanding of certain basic ideas relating to your subject. On the other hand, at postgraduate level it would be taken for granted that these were understood.

9 One way that helps academic writing to be clear is to have an evident, **logical structure**. There is no point in carrying out appropriate research and having a really good grasp of a topic, if you then write your findings in an unstructured way. It would be very much like writing instructions for someone to go from A to B but giving them in the wrong order, muddling up the junctions and landmarks. The person reading them and trying to follow them would end up being totally confused and unsure whether you really did know the route!

10 A major feature of academic writing, which is different from other styles of writing, is the need for **referencing**. Whenever you use other people’s ideas, even if you are not quoting their exact words, you must let your reader know their source - that is where you have found them. Most of the time you will not use quotations but put the ideas into your *own* words, showing that you understand them. When you do use others’ words, you **must** make this clear by using quotation marks (“...”) for a short quotation or indenting for a longer one. Finally, you will need to list all the sources you have used in your work.

Your Departmental Handbook will give details of how this should be done.

MAKE GOOD USE OF IT!

Not referencing properly may result in a charge of plagiarism.

A Selection of Tips

Remaining impersonal and avoiding “I”

There is generally a rule in academic writing that the 1st person - that is “I”, “we”, “my” etc. - should *not* be used. This makes your writing sound more objective and impersonal. (The exception to this rule is that if you are writing a reflective assignment, relating to and analysing your *own* experiences, it is most likely that “I” will have to be used.) Similarly, “you” should be avoided.

If you do need to refer to yourself, you can write “**the (present) writer / author...**” e.g. “The present author considers that...” or “The author’s view is that...” This means YOU!

Avoid “I” or “you” by using “**one**”. For example, “One could argue that...” or “If one is in such a situation, one could...”

Avoid “you” and “I” by starting with an **impersonal “it”** e.g. “It can be considered/ argued / claimed that...”

Avoid “you” or “I” by using **passive sentences** such as “The solution was added to the test tube” instead of “I added the solution to the test tube”. (The meaning is the same but there is no mention of *who* did the adding, which can be understood.)

Don’t worry if Microsoft Word complains about passive voices – it is not in charge!

NB. If your departmental guidelines contradict this ruling, ignore the above and do what your department requires.

Avoiding problems of “expression”

- Do not end up with problems of whether to use “**his**” or “**her**”. It is easier to use plurals. For example, instead of writing “A student should always check *his/ her* English carefully” it is simpler to say “Students should always check **their** work carefully”.
- Very long sentences can be confusing for the reader. In addition, there is a greater chance that grammatical mistakes will creep into them. Do not fall into the mistaken belief of thinking that academic writing must consist of long, complex sentences. It is often better to use **short sentences**. Do not be afraid to use them as they **add clarity**.
- Always write in **full sentences**. “Sentence fragments”, as they are called, will be marked down. (For example, “Whereas this is sometimes the case.” or “Health care professionals being aware of this issue.” are not full sentences. They do not make sense on their own. Something needs to be added for them to make sense.)

Choosing the right words

- Try to **avoid informal words**. Think of the sort that would be used in academic books or journals, rather than magazines. For example, use “quotation” rather than “quote”, “many” rather than “lots of” or in Nursing Studies, use “teenage mothers” rather than “teen mums”.
- Use the words that are appropriate for your area of study. Most disciplines have words which have **precise** meanings. For example, in Law, you might need to use “statutory instrument” instead of “rule”. Being precise in your choice of words helps to add clarity to your work.
- **Avoid using “lazy” words** such as “nice”, “get” or “stuff”. (They are usually acceptable in informal speech but not sufficiently formal or precise for academic writing.) For example, “obtain”, “acquire” or “become” may be more appropriate than “get”.
- If you are unsure about the choice of words, it may help you to use a built in **Thesaurus** when using a word processor for your writing. (In Word 2007 right click on a word and choose Synonyms, you will be given a list of words with similar meanings, you can also click on the Thesaurus option for more choices. You may then want to check for the precise meaning and usage of a certain word in a **dictionary**. Over time, you will build up your own academic vocabulary.

Since academic writing tends to be cautious, you will probably find yourself frequently using words like “tends”, “suggests”, “could”, “may”, “might”, “possibly”, “probably” etc. These can make statements less forceful. One **possible** way of avoiding making generalisations which cannot be justified is to ask yourself, “Is this always the case?” For example, in the case of the statement “Vulnerable adults live in poor housing” is this always true? It may *often* be true but it would be better to be **cautious** and say “Vulnerable adults **may** live in poor housing”.

The use of what is called ‘litotes’ can be helpful when wanting to be **cautious**. This is where you use a **negative with a negative adjective**. For example, “It is **not unlikely** that further research will prove that...”

Other Aspects of Writing Academically

Spelling

- Correct spelling is important. Use the spelling and grammar checking tool if you are using a word processor. (In Word 2007 click on ‘**Review**’ near the top of the screen, then ‘**Spelling and Grammar**’ at the top left.) Remember that you still need to use your own judgement and common sense when using this tool!
- Remember that you are in the U.K. so you need to use British English, not American English spelling, for example “colour”, not “color”.
- Be particularly careful about checking the spelling of the **names** of authors and the titles of publications. You *must* be **accurate**.
- “Been” and “being” can be confused. As an example, “**Being** in control of the situation, she was able to...” means “since she was in control of the situation”. On the other hand, “They have (or had) **been** in this situation for many years”

simply means that they were in the situation and “been” is used to complete the past tense after ‘have’ or ‘has’.

- It can be easy to confuse “**were**” (the past form of ‘are’, as in “In the 1800s there **were** many cases of ...”) and “**where**” (as in “This was **where** the problem arose...”).
- Similarly, ‘**two, to and too**’ sound alike (they are **homophones**) but need to be used in the right place. ‘Two’ is the number, which is not too much of a problem. “Too” is not so easy. In general if there is an idea of “as well” or “also” (“He too puts forward the idea that...”) OR of “more / less than is desirable, necessary or acceptable” (“There is too little information to be able to reach a firm conclusion” or “It is often too difficult to...”), you need to use “too”. In other cases, “to” will be the spelling.

Punctuation

There are Skills Guides available on [Apostrophes](#) and [Punctuation](#) found in the Written Assignments section of our website (see first page footer).

Grammar

Correct **grammar** is very important. (Thinking about the accurate grammar in the academic books and papers that you read may help.)

Check that you have agreements of singular+singular /plural+plural e.g. “One of the most important issues is...” (not “are”); “they were...” (not “was”); “The issue, which has been widely discussed by many researchers...concerns...”

You need to use the word ‘**that**’ more in formal writing – in particular after verbs of utterance, such as “say”, “report”, “argue” etc. It can help to make your writing clearer e.g. “I am going to say **that** I disagree.”

Structuring your work

A clear overall structure is essential.

Introduction

Make sure your essay always has an introduction, giving any relevant background information and letting your reader know what will follow in the rest of the essay.



Main Body

The main body of your work needs to be divided into **paragraphs**. Each paragraph will cover one topic only, which will be appropriately explained.

- Each **paragraph** needs its own **structure**. It will have a **topic sentence** which tells the reader about the subject of the paragraph. The topic sentence is very often the first in the paragraph. It can be short. This means the reader will have a very clear idea of what the paragraph will be about. What follows in the rest of the paragraph is information expanding on the idea, giving evidence as necessary.
- Remember then that in academic English, a **paragraph** should contain **more than one sentence**. (This is often not the case with newspapers or magazines which are *not* your model to imitate!) Looking at the length of paragraphs in the books and journals you read may be a useful guide.
- If you find you have written a very short paragraph of one or two sentences, check whether you need to **add extra information** to expand it OR whether it would be better to **include the information in another paragraph**.
- Try to use a range of **'linking' words** and expressions such as "moreover", "in addition", "however", "nevertheless", "on the other hand" in your paragraphs. They help your reader by making your arguments much clearer. It may help to think of them as "signposts", indicating where your arguments are leading.
- It may help your reader to clearly conclude a paragraph and indicate what will follow in the next one; for example "This has suggested that... and the essay will now consider an alternative view."



Conclusion

A general conclusion is needed to round off your work. The reader is then certain of what your views are. The reasons for your views, based on appropriate sources, will have *already* been given in the main body of your work. If you realise you are introducing new ideas, stop and decide whether they are relevant. If they are, then think where they should fit in the main body.

Referencing

As soon as you start to **research and read** for any academic assignment, make sure you note all the details of what you are reading, so that the correct information can be included in your references. Every important fact and idea needs to be referenced. Your reader can then easily check the source, if needed. (Common sense will tell you when a fact is so well known that it does not need to be referenced e.g. Margaret Thatcher was Britain's first female Prime Minister.)

For more information on the very important subject of referencing, please see [Skills Guide on Referencing](#) - found in the Assignments section of our website (see first page footer)

Proofreading

- Always allow plenty of time for proof-reading your work, ideally leaving at least a day between completing it and checking it so that you can read it objectively, with a 'fresh eye'.
- Be aware of the type of mistakes you tend to make (maybe forgetting to use full-forms such as "is not" or writing "where" instead of "were") so you can focus on eliminating these.
- Reading your work *aloud*, rather than silently, may make you aware of mistakes, particularly regarding punctuation.

For more information on Proofreading, see [Proofreading Skills Guide](#) - found in the Assignments section of our Skills Website (see first page footer).

Some general advice

- Avoid repeating the same word in a single paragraph. Try to find an alternative.
- Do *not* use humour or irony in academic writing!
- Remember that it is appropriate to use qualifications such as "Within the scope of this essay, it will not be possible to cover all the implications of the question."
- Finally, remember that 'practice makes perfect'; the more you write in an academic style, the more natural it will become.

★ Star Resource ★

A useful site is the academic phrase bank website at the University of Manchester:

<http://www.phrasebank.manchester.ac.uk>.

This site provides generic phrases which you can use in your academic writing where appropriate.

All web addresses in this leaflet were correct at the time of publication.

The information in this leaflet can be made available in an alternative format on request. Please email skills@hull.ac.uk