

Academic Writing Skills

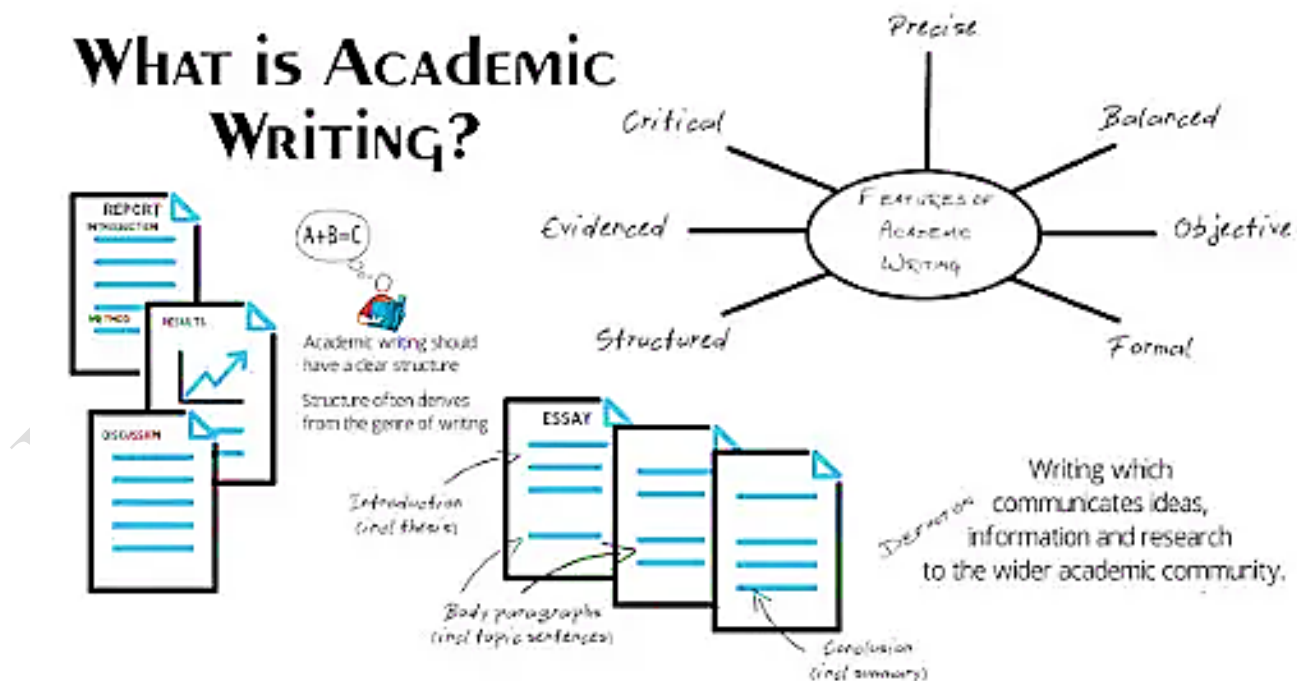
First Stage
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1. Introduction

Academic writing is considered the most important skill in academic contexts since writing is the main method of academic communication. It is also the most difficult skill for most students. This course considers what academic writing is, looking in detail at the main features of academic writing, as well as suggesting ways to develop academic writing.

2. What is academic writing?

Academic writing is writing which communicates ideas, information and research to the wider academic community. It can be divided into two types: student academic writing, which is used as a form of assessment at university, as well as at schools as preparation for university study; and expert academic writing, which is writing that is intended for publication in an academic journal or book.



Both types of academic writing (student and expert) are expected to adhere to the same standards. The characteristics of academic writing which together distinguish it from other forms of writing are that it is:

1. Structured
2. Evidenced
3. Critical
4. Balanced
5. Precise
6. Objective
7. Formal

3. Features of academic writing

1. Structured

Academic writing should have a clear structure. The structure will often derive from the type of writing. For example, a report will have an introduction (including the aim or aims), a method section, a discussion section and so on, while an essay will have an introduction (including a thesis statement), clear body paragraphs with topic sentences, and a conclusion. The writing should be coherent, with logical progression throughout, and cohesive, with the different parts of the writing connected. Careful planning before writing is essential to ensure that the final product will be well structured, with a clear focus and logical progression of ideas.

2. Evidenced

Opinions and arguments in academic writing should be supported by evidence. Often the writing will be based on information from experts in the field, and as such, it will be important to reference the information appropriately, for example via the use of in-text citations and a reference section.

3. Critical

Academic writing does more than just describe. As an academic writer, you should not simply accept everything you read as fact. You need to analyze and evaluate the information you are writing about, in other words, make judgements about it before you decide whether and how to integrate it into your writing. This is known as critical writing. Critical writing requires a great deal of research for the writer to develop a deep enough understanding of the topic to be truly critical about it.

4. Balanced

Academic writing should be balanced. This means giving consideration to all sides of the issue and avoiding bias. As noted above, all research, evidence and arguments can be challenged, and the academic writer needs to show their stance on a particular topic, in other words, how strong their claims are. This can be done using hedges, for example, phrases such as the evidence suggests... or this could be caused by..., or boosters, that is, phrases such as clearly or the research indicates.

5. Precise

Academic writing should use clear and precise language to ensure the reader understands the meaning. This includes the use of technical (i.e. subject-specific) vocabulary, which should be used when it conveys the meaning more precisely than a similar non-technical term. Sometimes such technical vocabulary may need defining, though only if the term is not commonly used by others in the same discipline and will therefore not be readily understood by the reader.

6. Objective

Academic writing is objective. In other words, the emphasis is placed on the arguments and information, rather than on the writer. As a result, academic writing

tends to use nouns and noun phrases more than verbs and adverbs. It also tends to use more passive structures, rather than active voice, for example, the water was heated rather than I heated the water.

7. Formal

Finally, academic writing is more formal than everyday writing. It tends to use longer words and more complex sentences while avoiding spoken or informal words or expressions that might be common in Local English (Slang). There are words and collocations which are used in academic writing more frequently than in non-academic writing, and researchers have developed lists of these words and phrases to help students of academic English, such as the Academic Word List, the Academic Vocabulary List, and the Academic Collocation List.

Most Important Academic Word List

Word	Synonym
abandon	abandoned, abandoning, abandonment, abandons, e.g.
abstract	abstraction, abstractions, abstractly, abstracts, e.g.
academy	academia, academic, academically, academics, academies, e.g.
access	accessed, accesses, accessibility, accessible, accessing, inaccessible
accommodate	accommodated, accommodates, accommodating, accommodation
accompany	accompanied, accompanies, accompaniment, accompanying, unaccompanied
accumulate	accumulated, accumulating, accumulation, accumulates
accurate	accuracy, accurately, inaccuracy, inaccuracies, inaccurate
achieve	achievable, achieved, achievement, achievements, achieves, achieving
acknowledge	acknowledged, acknowledges, acknowledging, acknowledgement, acknowledgements
acquire	acquired, acquires, acquiring, acquisition, acquisitions
adapt	adaptability, adaptable, adaptation, adaptations, adapted, adapting, adaptive, adapts
adequate	adequacy, adequately, inadequacies, inadequacy, inadequate, inadequately
adjust	adjusted, adjusting, adjustment, adjustments, adjusts, readjust, readjusted, readjusting, readjustment
administrate	administrates, administration, administrations, administrative, administratively, administrator, administrators
adult	adulthood, adults
advocate	advocacy, advocated, advocates, advocating
affect	affected, affecting, affective, affectively, affects, unaffected
aggregate	aggregated, aggregates, aggregating, aggregation
aid	aided, aiding, aids, unaided
allocate	allocated, allocates, allocating, allocation, allocations

4. Developing your academic writing

Given the relatively specialist nature of academic writing, it can seem scary when you first begin. You can develop your academic writing by paying attention to feedback from teachers or the upper class and seeking specific areas to improve. Another way to develop your academic writing is to read more. By reading academic journals or texts, you can develop a better understanding of the features that make academic writing different from other forms of writing.

5. Planning for the Document

The key concept in technical communication is that audience and purpose determine everything about how you communicate on the job. As a nurse, for example, you would need to communicate information to both doctors and patients. You'd likely use different language with these two audiences and have different goals in relaying the information to each party. As a sales manager, you would communicate information about your products to potential clients; you'd communicate that same information differently to other sales representatives that you're training to work with.

6. Using an Audience Profile Sheet

As you read the discussions in this course about audience characteristics and techniques for learning about your audience, you might think about using an audience profile sheet. This sheet is a form that prompts you to consider various audience characteristics as you plan your document. For example, the sheet can help you realize that you do not know much about your primary reader's work history and what that history can tell you about how to shape your document.

7. Why Is Your Audience Reading Your Document?

For each of your most important readers, consider why he or she is reading your document. Some writers find it helpful to classify readers— such as primary, secondary, and tertiary — each of which identifies a reader’s distance from the writer.

AUDIENCE PROFILE SHEET

Reader’s Name: Harry Becker

Reader’s Job Title: Manager, Drafting and Design Department

Kind of Reader: Primary Secondary

Education: BS, Architectural Engineering, Northwestern, 1992. CAD/CAM Short Course, 1992; Motivating Your Employees Seminar, 1997; Writing on the Job Short Course, 2002

Professional Experience: Worked for two years in a small architecture firm. Started here 16 years ago as a draftsman. Worked his way up to Assistant Manager, then Manager. Instrumental in the Wilson project, particularly in coordinating personnel and equipment.

Job Responsibilities: Supervises a staff of 12 draftspeople. Approves or denies all requests for capital expenditures over \$2,000 coming from his department. Works with employees to help them make the best case for the purchase. After approving or denying the request, forwards it to Tina Buterbaugh, Manager, Finance Dept., who maintains all capital expenditure records.

Personal Characteristics: N/A

Personal Preferences: Likes straightforward documents, lots of evidence, clear structure. Dislikes complicated documents full of jargon.

Cultural Characteristics: Nothing of note.

Attitude Toward the Writer: No problems.

Attitude Toward the Subject: He understands and approves of my argument.

Expectations About the Subject: Expects to see a clear argument with financial data and detailed comparisons of available systems.

Expectations About the Document: Expects to see a report, with an executive summary, of about 10 pages.

Reasons for Reading the Document: To offer suggestions and eventually approve or deny the request.

Way of Reading the Document:

Skim it Study it Read a portion of it Which portion?

Modify it and submit it to another reader

Attempt to implement recommendations

Use it to perform a task or carry out a procedure

Use it to create another document

Other Explain.

Reading Skill: Excellent

Reader’s Physical Environment: N/A

8. How Will Your Readers Use Your Document?

In thinking about how your reader will use your document, consider the following three factors:

1. The way your reader will read your document. Will he or she

— file it?

— skim it?

— read only a portion of it?

— study it carefully?

— modify it and submit it to another reader?

— try to implement recommendations?

— use it to perform a test or carry out a procedure?

— use it as a source document for another document?

Therefore, put this information in an appendix. If you know that your reader wants to use your status report as raw material for a report to a higher-level reader, try to write it so that it requires little rewriting. Use the reader's writing style and make sure the reader has access to the electronic file so that your report can be merged with the new document without needing to be retyped.

2. Your reader's reading skills. Consider whether you should be writing at all, or whether it would be better to do an oral presentation or use computer-based training.