

The dos and don'ts of academic writing

Academic writing is a formal style of writing used in universities and scholarly publications. You'll encounter it in journal articles and books on academic topics, and you'll be expected to write your [essays](#), [research papers](#), and [dissertation](#) in academic style.

Academic writing follows the same [writing process](#) as other types of texts, but it has specific conventions in terms of content, structure and style.

Academic writing is...

- [Formal and unbiased](#)
- [Clear and precise](#)
- [Focused and well-structured](#)
- [Well-sourced](#)
- [Correct and consistent](#)

Academic writing is not...

- [Personal](#)
- [Long-winded](#)
- [Emotive and grandiose](#)

Types of academic writing

Academics mostly write texts intended for publication, such as journal articles, reports, books, and chapters in edited collections. For students, the most common types of academic writing assignments are listed below.

Type of academic text	Definition
Essay	A fairly short, self-contained argument, often using sources from a class in response to a question provided by an instructor.
Research paper	A more in-depth investigation based on independent research, often in response to a question chosen by the student.
Thesis/dissertation	The large final research project undertaken at the end of a degree, usually on a topic of the student's choice.
Research proposal	An outline of a potential topic and plan for a future dissertation or research project.
Literature review	A critical synthesis of existing research on a topic, usually written in order to inform the approach of a new piece of research.

Different fields of study have different priorities in terms of the writing they produce. For example, in scientific writing it's crucial to clearly and accurately report methods and results; in the humanities, the focus is on constructing convincing arguments through the use of textual evidence.

However, all academic writing shares certain key principles intended to help convey information as effectively as possible.

Academic writing is...

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Formal and unbiased

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Academic writing aims to convey information in an impartial way. The goal is to base arguments on the evidence under consideration, not the author's preconceptions. All claims should be supported with relevant evidence, not just asserted.

To avoid bias, it's important to represent the work of other researchers and the results of your own research fairly and accurately. This means clearly outlining your **methodology** and being honest about the **limitations** of your research.

The formal style used in academic writing ensures that research is presented consistently across different texts, so that studies can be objectively assessed and compared with other research.

Because of this, it's important to strike the right tone with your language choices. Avoid **informal language**, including slang, **contractions**, clichés, and conversational phrases:

- **Also, a lot** of the findings are **a little** unreliable.
- **Moreover, many** of the findings are **somewhat** unreliable.

Clear and precise

It's important to use clear and precise language to ensure that your reader knows exactly what you mean. This means being as specific as possible and avoiding **vague language**:

- **People** have been interested in this **thing** for **a long time**.
- **Researchers** have been interested in this **phenomenon** for **at least 10 years**.

Avoid hedging your claims with words like "perhaps," as this can give the impression that you lack confidence in your arguments. Reflect on your word choice to ensure it accurately and directly conveys your meaning:

- This **could perhaps suggest** that...
- This **suggests** that...

Specialist language or jargon is common and often necessary in academic writing, which generally targets an audience of other academics in related fields.

However, jargon should be used to make your writing more concise and accurate, not to make it more complicated. A specialist term should be used when:

- It conveys information more precisely than a comparable non-specialist term.
- Your reader is likely to be familiar with the term.
- The term is commonly used by other researchers in your field.

The best way to familiarize yourself with the kind of jargon used in your field is to read papers by other researchers and pay attention to their language.

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Focused and well-structured

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An academic text is not just a collection of ideas about a topic—it needs to have a clear purpose. Start with a relevant [research question](#) or [thesis statement](#), and use it to develop a focused argument. Only include information that is relevant to your overall purpose.

A coherent structure is crucial to organize your ideas. Pay attention to structure at three levels: the structure of the whole text, paragraph structure, and sentence structure.

Overall structure

- Always include an [introduction](#) and a [conclusion](#).
- Divide longer texts into chapters or sections with clear [headings](#).
- Make sure information is presented in a logical order.

Paragraph structure

- Start a new [paragraph](#) when you move onto a new idea.
- Use a [topic sentence](#) at the start of each paragraph to indicate what it's about, and make clear [transitions](#) between paragraphs.
- Make sure every paragraph is relevant to your argument or question.

Sentence structure

- Use [transition words](#) to express the connections between different ideas within and between sentences.
- Use appropriate [punctuation](#) to avoid [sentence fragments or run-on sentences](#).
- Use a variety of sentence lengths and structures.

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Well-sourced

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Academic writing uses sources to support its claims. Sources are other texts (or media objects like photographs or films) that the author analyzes or uses as evidence. Many of your sources will be written by other academics; academic writing is collaborative and builds on previous research.

It's important to consider which sources are [credible](#) and appropriate to use in academic writing. For example, [citing Wikipedia](#) is typically discouraged. Don't rely on websites for information; instead, use academic databases and your university library to find credible sources.

You must always [cite your sources](#) in academic writing. This means acknowledging whenever you [quote](#) or [paraphrase](#) someone else’s work by including a citation in the text and a reference list at the end.

APA citation example

In-text citation	Elsewhere, it has been argued that the method is “the best currently available” (Smith, 2019, p. 25).
Reference list	Smith, J. (2019). <i>Statistical analysis methods</i> (2nd ed.). New York, NY: Norton.

There are many different [citation styles](#) with different rules. The most common styles are [APA](#), [MLA](#), and [Chicago](#). Make sure to consistently follow whatever style your institution requires. If you don’t cite correctly, you may get in trouble for [plagiarism](#).

You can easily create accurate citations in APA or MLA style using our Citation Generators.

[APA Citation Generator](#)[MLA Citation Generator](#)

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- **Correct and consistent**

As well as following the rules of grammar, punctuation and citation, it’s important to consistently apply stylistic conventions regarding:

- How to write [numbers](#)
- Introducing [abbreviations](#)
- Using [verb tenses](#) in different sections
- [Capitalization](#) of terms and headings
- Spelling and punctuation differences between [UK and US English](#)

In some cases there are several acceptable approaches that you can choose between—the most important thing is to apply the same rules consistently, and to carefully [proofread](#) your text before you submit.

Academic writing is not...

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- **Personal**

Academic writing generally tries to avoid being too personal. Information about the author may come in at some points—for example in the acknowledgements or in a personal reflection—but for the most part the text should focus on the research itself.

Always avoid addressing the reader directly with the **second-person pronoun** “you.” Use the impersonal pronoun “one” or an alternate phrasing instead for generalizations:

- As a teacher, **you** must treat **your** students fairly.
- As a teacher, **one** must treat **one’s** students fairly.
- Teachers must treat their students fairly.

The use of the **first-person pronoun** “I” used to be similarly discouraged in academic writing, but it is increasingly accepted in many fields. If you’re unsure whether to use the first person, pay attention to conventions in your field or ask your instructor.

When you refer to yourself, it should be for good reason. You can position yourself and describe what you did during the research, but avoid arbitrarily inserting your personal thoughts and feelings:

- In my opinion...
- I think that...
- I like/dislike...
- I conducted interviews with...
- I argue that...
- I hope to achieve...

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Long-winded

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Many students think their writing isn’t academic unless it’s over-complicated and long-winded. This isn’t a good approach—instead, aim to be as **concise** and direct as possible.

If a term can be cut or replaced with a more straightforward one without affecting your meaning, it should be. Avoid **redundant** phrasings in your text, and try replacing **phrasal verbs** with their **one-word equivalents** where possible:

- Interest in this phenomenon **carried on** in **the year 2018**.
- Interest in this phenomenon **continued** in **2018**.

Repetition is a part of academic writing—for example, summarizing earlier information in the conclusion—but it’s important to avoid unnecessary repetition. Make sure that none of your sentences are repeating a point you’ve already made in different words.

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Emotive and grandiose

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An academic text is not the same thing as a literary, journalistic, or marketing text. Though you're still trying to be persuasive, a lot of techniques from these styles are not appropriate in an academic context. Specifically, you should avoid appeals to emotion and inflated claims.

Though you may be writing about a topic that's sensitive or important to you, the point of academic writing is to clearly communicate ideas, information and arguments, not to inspire an emotional response. Avoid using **emotive or subjective language**:

- This horrible tragedy was obviously one of the worst catastrophes in construction history.
- The injury and mortality rates of this accident were among the highest in construction history.

Students are sometimes tempted to make the case for their topic with **exaggerated**, unsupported claims and flowery language. Stick to specific, grounded arguments that you can support with evidence, and don't overstate your point:

- Charles Dickens is the greatest writer of the Victorian period, and his influence on all subsequent literature is enormous.
- Charles Dickens is one of the best-known writers of the Victorian period, and has had a significant influence on the development of the English novel.

Academic writing checklist

Use the checklist below to assess whether you have followed the rules of effective academic writing.

Academic writing checklist

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• I avoid informal terms and contractions.

• I present information as precisely and accurately as possible.

• I don't use unnecessary jargon and define terms where necessary.

• Every part of the text relates to my central argument or question.

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I use appropriate transitions between sentences.

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I begin each paragraph with a topic sentence.

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I follow style guidelines consistently.

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I avoid writing “you.”

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I avoid redundant words and phrases.

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I avoid emotive or exaggerated language.

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I support my claims with evidence.

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I cite my sources.

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Other students also liked

Taboo words in academic writing

Academic writing should be correct, concise and precise. Avoid using language that is too informal, vague, exaggerated, or subjective.

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How to write more concisely

Academic writing is more effective when it is concise and direct. Shorten your sentences by cutting inflated phrases and redundancies.

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Transition words and phrases in academic writing

Transition words and phrases link together different ideas in your text. Using them effectively helps the reader to follow your arguments.