**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](https://www.scribbr.com/category/academic-essay/), [research papers](https://www.scribbr.com/category/research-paper/), and [dissertation](https://www.scribbr.com/category/dissertation/) in academic style.

Academic writing follows the same [writing process](https://www.scribbr.com/academic-writing/writing-process/) as other types of texts, but it has specific conventions in terms of content, structure and style.

| **Academic writing is…** | **Academic writing is not…** |
| --- | --- |
| * [Formal and unbiased](https://www.scribbr.com/category/academic-writing/#formal) * [Clear and precise](https://www.scribbr.com/category/academic-writing/#clear) * [Focused and well-structured](https://www.scribbr.com/category/academic-writing/#focused) * [Well-sourced](https://www.scribbr.com/category/academic-writing/#sourced) * [Correct and consistent](https://www.scribbr.com/category/academic-writing/#correct) | * [Personal](https://www.scribbr.com/category/academic-writing/#personal) * [Long-winded](https://www.scribbr.com/category/academic-writing/#long) * [Emotive and grandiose](https://www.scribbr.com/category/academic-writing/#emotive) |

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**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**](https://www.scribbr.com/category/academic-essay/) | A fairly short, self-contained argument, often using sources from a class in response to a question provided by an instructor. |
| [**Research paper**](https://www.scribbr.com/category/research-paper/) | A more in-depth investigation based on independent research, often in response to a question chosen by the student. |
| [**Thesis/dissertation**](https://www.scribbr.com/category/dissertation/) | The large final research project undertaken at the end of a degree, usually on a topic of the student’s choice. |
| [**Research proposal**](https://www.scribbr.com/dissertation/research-proposal/) | An outline of a potential topic and plan for a future dissertation or research project. |
| [**Literature review**](https://www.scribbr.com/dissertation/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…**

* **Formal and unbiased**

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](https://www.scribbr.com/dissertation/methodology/) and being honest about the [limitations](https://www.scribbr.com/dissertation/discussion/#acknowledge-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](https://www.scribbr.com/academic-writing/taboo-words/#too-informal), including slang, [contractions](https://www.scribbr.com/academic-writing/abbreviations-and-acronyms/#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](https://www.scribbr.com/academic-writing/taboo-words/#too-vague):

* **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.

* **Focused and well-structured**

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](https://www.scribbr.com/research-process/research-questions/) or [thesis statement](https://www.scribbr.com/academic-essay/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](https://www.scribbr.com/academic-essay/introduction/) and a [conclusion](https://www.scribbr.com/academic-essay/conclusion/). * Divide longer texts into chapters or sections with clear [headings](https://www.scribbr.com/academic-writing/effective-headings/). * Make sure information is presented in a logical order. |
| **Paragraph structure** | * Start a new [paragraph](https://www.scribbr.com/research-paper/paragraph-structure/) when you move onto a new idea. * Use a[topic sentence](https://www.scribbr.com/research-paper/topic-sentences/) at the start of each paragraph to indicate what it’s about, and make clear [transitions](https://www.scribbr.com/academic-essay/transitions-in-essays/) between paragraphs. * Make sure every paragraph is relevant to your argument or question. |
| **Sentence structure** | * Use [transition words](https://www.scribbr.com/academic-writing/transitions/) to express the connections between different ideas within and between sentences. * Use appropriate[punctuation](https://www.scribbr.com/language-rules/punctuation-mistakes/)to avoid [sentence fragments or run-on sentences](https://www.scribbr.com/language-rules/sentence-structure/). * Use a variety of sentence lengths and structures. |

* **Well-sourced**

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](https://www.scribbr.com/citing-sources/craap-test/) and appropriate to use in academic writing. For example, [citing Wikipedia](https://www.scribbr.com/citing-sources/how-to-cite-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](https://www.scribbr.com/category/citing-sources/) in academic writing. This means acknowledging whenever you [quote](https://www.scribbr.com/citing-sources/how-to-quote/) or [paraphrase](https://www.scribbr.com/citing-sources/how-to-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). *Statistical analysis methods* (2nd ed.). New York, NY: Norton. |

There are many different [citation styles](https://www.scribbr.com/citing-sources/citation-styles/) with different rules. The most common styles are [APA](https://www.scribbr.com/category/apa-style/), [MLA](https://www.scribbr.com/category/mla/), and [Chicago](https://www.scribbr.com/category/chicago-style/). Make sure to consistently follow whatever style your institution requires. If you don’t cite correctly, you may get in trouble for [plagiarism](https://www.scribbr.com/category/plagiarism/).

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[**APA Citation Generator**](https://www.scribbr.com/apa-citation-generator/)[**MLA Citation Generator**](https://www.scribbr.com/mla-citation-generator/)

* **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](https://www.scribbr.com/academic-writing/numbers/)
* Introducing [abbreviations](https://www.scribbr.com/academic-writing/abbreviations-and-acronyms/)
* Using [verb tenses](https://www.scribbr.com/language-rules/tenses/) in different sections
* [Capitalization](https://www.scribbr.com/language-rules/capitalization-rules/) of terms and headings
* Spelling and punctuation differences between [UK and US English](https://www.scribbr.com/academic-writing/us-vs-uk-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](https://www.scribbr.com/language-rules/what-is-proofreading/) your text before you submit.

**Academic writing is not…**

* **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](https://www.scribbr.com/academic-writing/pronouns/#second-person-pronouns) “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](https://www.scribbr.com/academic-writing/pronouns/#first-person-pronouns) “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…
* **Long-winded**

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](https://www.scribbr.com/academic-writing/write-shorter-sentences-clarify-dissertation/) 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](https://www.scribbr.com/academic-writing/repetition-redundancy/) phrasings in your text, and try replacing [phrasal verbs](https://www.scribbr.com/language-rules/phrasal-verbs/) with their [one-word equivalents](https://www.scribbr.com/academic-writing/47-phrasal-verbs-and-their-one-word-substitutions/) 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.

* **Emotive and grandiose**

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](https://www.scribbr.com/academic-writing/taboo-words/#too-subjective):

* 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](https://www.scribbr.com/academic-writing/taboo-words/#too-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.

**Checklist: Academic writing**

**0 / 15**

* I avoid informal terms and [contractions](https://www.scribbr.com/academic-writing/abbreviations-and-acronyms/).
* I avoid [second-person pronouns](https://www.scribbr.com/academic-writing/pronouns/) (“you”).
* I avoid emotive or exaggerated language.
* I avoid [redundant](https://www.scribbr.com/academic-writing/repetition-redundancy/) words and phrases.
* I avoid unnecessary jargon and define terms where needed.
* I present information as precisely and accurately as possible.
* I use appropriate [transitions](https://www.scribbr.com/academic-writing/transition-words/) to show the connections between my ideas.
* My text is logically organized using [paragraphs](https://www.scribbr.com/research-paper/paragraph-structure/).
* Each paragraph is focused on a single idea, expressed in a clear [topic sentence](https://www.scribbr.com/research-paper/topic-sentences/).
* Every part of the text relates to my central [thesis](https://www.scribbr.com/academic-essay/thesis-statement/)or [research question](https://www.scribbr.com/research-process/research-questions/).
* I support my claims with evidence.
* I use the appropriate [verb tenses](https://www.scribbr.com/language-rules/tenses/) in each section.
* I consistently use either [UK or US English](https://www.scribbr.com/academic-writing/us-vs-uk-english/).
* I [format numbers](https://www.scribbr.com/academic-writing/numbers/) consistently.
* I [cite my sources](https://www.scribbr.com/category/citing-sources/) using a consistent [citation style](https://www.scribbr.com/citing-sources/citation-styles/).

**What is academic vocabulary?**

Academic vocabulary includes words used in academic dialogue and texts. It does not include words students use in general conversation, but academic vocabulary relates to other familiar words that students do use. For example, rather than using the simple verb *watch*, an academic term would be *observe*. Academic vocabulary words help students understand oral directions and classroom instructions as well as comprehend text across different subject areas.

The words in our vocabulary fall into three tiers.

**Tier 1 words** include basic or high-frequency vocabulary words and usually don’t include multiple meaning words.

**Tier 2 words** are less familiar to students but help in comprehending written texts and conversations shared between the teacher and student. Tier 2 words are “general academic words” and sometimes may be referred to as “rich vocabulary.” These words are precise but more subtle forms of familiar words and include multiple meaning words. For example, instead of saying “he *walked*,” one may say “he *sauntered*.” Tier 2 words cross over into a variety of domains or subject areas.

**Tier 3 words** are “domain specific” and are critical to understanding subject content. Generally, they have low frequency use and are limited to specific subjects – i.e., the geographical terms *isthmus, peninsula,* and *cape*. We find Tier 3 words in informational texts or textbooks. Tier 3 words are best learned through direct instruction within specific subject or content lessons.

Still, the term “academic vocabulary” may not hold the same meaning for all teachers. Many educators think this term represents a “*vocabulary of directions*,” or the words students must know in order to perform well on standardized tests. “Testing” vocabulary represents yet another category of words. Testing vocabulary includes active verbs and concrete nouns. The active verbs direct students to think more deeply about their subject matter (*identify, explain, organize, retell, illustrate,* etc.). The nouns tell students what they are to use to present their comprehension of the subject material for an assessment or assignment (i.e., *outline, graph, chart, essay, theme, analogy, Venn diagram,* etc.). Noted educator and author, Jim Burke suggests, “You cannot expect to succeed on assignments if you do not understand the directions.” Burke recently released his “A-List” of 15 academic vocabulary words based on what his current teaching colleagues decided are central to ***all*** subjects and are in keeping with state standards and the Common Core. For each of the “A-List” verbs, Burke provides three more related words to help students understand and generalize the term across the curriculum. For example, the word *analyze* is followed by *break down*, *deconstruct*, and *examine*. Click the following link to view this list. Teachers may photocopy the list for classroom use only.

All students, especially English Language Learners and other at-risk students, require explicit and direct instruction in order to learn many Tier 2 and most Tier 3 vocabulary words. Learning academic and testing vocabulary in a variety of ways will help meet students’ specific learning style or needs.

As early as kindergarten, direct and focused vocabulary instruction for Tier 2 and Tier 3 vocabulary, including test vocabulary, should begin. Teachers must be responsible for ***selecting*** the vocabulary for their students to learn and ***not be dependent*** on the bold, italicized, or highlighted words in a textbook, many of which students may already know or do not need. Vocabulary instruction should focus on words students will encounter throughout their academic careers, rather than those they will rarely use after passing a test.

Each state’s curriculum standards and the Common Core State Standards (if your state has adopted them) provides objectives to assist teachers in selecting appropriate Tier 2 and Tier 3 vocabulary lists across all subject areas. Using these selected words, teachers can and should create their own custom vocabulary lists as well as context-rich sentences and definitions in order to teach and help students understand and use them correctly in context, thus mastering their learning objectives.

Academic word list

In this section you can do practice tests for all groups of the academic word list.

The Academic Word List (AWL) was developed by Averil Coxhead at the School of Linguistics and Applied Language Studies at Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand. The list contains 570 word families which were selected because they appear with great frequency in a broad range of academic texts. The list does not include words that are in the most frequent 2000 words of English (the General Service List), thus making it specific to academic contexts. The AWL was primarily made so that it could be used by teachers as part of a programme preparing learners for tertiary level study or used by students working alone to learn the words most needed to study at colleges and universities.  
The 570 words are divided into 10 Groups. The Groups are ordered such that the words in the first Group are the most frequent words and those in the last Group are the least frequent.

Group 1

sector • available • financial • process • individual • specific • principle • estimate • variables • method • data • research • contract • environment • export • source • assessment • policy • identified • create • derived • factors • procedure • definition • assume • theory • benefit • evidence • established • authority • major • issues • labour • occur • economic • involved • percent • interpretation • consistent • income • structure • legal • concept • formula • section • required • constitutional • analysis • distribution • function • area • approach • role • legislation • indicate • response • period • context • significant • similar •

Group 2

community • resident • range • construction • strategies • elements • previous • conclusion • security • aspects • acquisition • features • text • commission • regulations • computer • items • consumer • achieve • final • positive • evaluation • assistance • normal • relevant • distinction • region • traditional • impact • consequences • chapter • equation • appropriate • resources • participation • survey • potential • cultural • transfer • select • credit • affect • categories • perceived • sought • focus • purchase • injury • site • journal • primary • complex • institute • investment • administration • maintenance • design • obtained • restricted • conduct •

Group 3

comments • convention • published • framework • implies • negative • dominant • illustrated • outcomes • constant • shift • deduction • ensure • specified • justification • funds • reliance • physical • partnership • location • link • coordination • alternative • initial • validity • task • techniques • excluded • consent • proportion • demonstrate • reaction • criteria • minorities • technology • philosophy • removed • sex • compensation • sequence • corresponding • maximum • circumstances • instance • considerable • sufficient • corporate • interaction • contribution • immigration • component • constraints • technical • emphasis • scheme • layer • volume • document • registered • core •

Group 4

overall • emerged • regime • implementation • project • hence • occupational • internal • goals • retained • sum • integration • mechanism • parallel • imposed • despite • job • parameters • approximate • label • concentration • principal • series • predicted • summary • attitudes • undertaken • cycle • communication • ethnic • hypothesis • professional • status • conference • attributed • annual • obvious • error • implications • apparent • commitment • subsequent • debate • dimensions • promote • statistics • option • domestic • output • access • code • investigation • phase • prior • granted • stress • civil • contrast • resolution • adequate

Group 5

alter • stability • energy • aware • licence • enforcement • draft • styles • precise • medical • pursue • symbolic • marginal • capacity • generation • exposure • decline • academic • modified • external • psychology • fundamental • adjustment • ratio • whereas • enable • version • perspective • contact • network • facilitate • welfare • transition • amendment • logic • rejected • expansion • clause • prime • target • objective • sustainable • equivalent • liberal • notion • substitution • generated • trend • revenue • compounds • evolution • conflict • image • discretion • entities • orientation • consultation • mental • monitoring • challenge •

Group 6

intelligence • transformation • presumption • acknowledged • utility • furthermore • accurate • diversity • attached • recovery • assigned • tapes • motivation • bond • edition • nevertheless • transport • cited • fees • scope • enhanced • incorporated • instructions • subsidiary • input • abstract • ministry • capable • expert • preceding • display • incentive • inhibition • trace • ignored • incidence • estate • cooperative • revealed • index • lecture • discrimination • overseas • explicit • aggregate • gender • underlying • brief • domain • rational • minimum • interval • neutral • migration • flexibility • federal • author • initiatives • allocation • exceed •

Group 7

intervention • confirmed • definite • classical • chemical • voluntary • release • visible • finite • publication • channel • file • thesis • equipment • disposal • solely • deny • identical • submitted • grade • phenomenon • paradigm • ultimately • extract • survive • converted • transmission • global • inferred • guarantee • advocate • dynamic • simulation • topic • insert • reverse • decades • comprise • hierarchical • unique • comprehensive • couple • mode • differentiation • eliminate • priority • empirical • ideology • somewhat • aid • foundation • adults • adaptation • quotation • contrary • media • successive • innovation • prohibited • isolated •

Group 8

highlighted • eventually • inspection • termination • displacement • arbitrary • reinforced • denote • offset • exploitation • detected • abandon • random • revision • virtually • uniform • predominantly • thereby • implicit • tension • ambiguous • vehicle • clarity • conformity • contemporary • automatically • accumulation • appendix • widespread • infrastructure • deviation • fluctuations • restore • guidelines • commodity • minimises • practitioners • radical • plus • visual • chart • appreciation • prospect • dramatic • contradiction • currency • inevitably • complement • accompany • paragraph • induced • schedule • intensity • crucial • via • exhibit • bias • manipulation • theme • nuclear •

Group 9

bulk • behalf • unified • commenced • erosion • anticipated • minimal • ceases • vision • mutual • norms • intermediate • manual • supplementary • incompatible • concurrent • ethical • preliminary • integral • conversely • relaxed • confined • accommodation • temporary • distorted • passive • subordinate • analogous • military • scenario • revolution • diminished • coherence • suspended • mature • assurance • rigid • controversy • sphere • mediation • format • trigger • qualitative • portion • medium • coincide • violation • device • insights • refine • devoted • team • overlap • attained • restraints • inherent • route • protocol • founded • duration •

Group 10

whereby • inclination • encountered • convinced • assembly • albeit • enormous • reluctant • posed • persistent • undergo • notwithstanding • straightforward • panel • odd • intrinsic • compiled • adjacent • integrity • forthcoming • conceived • ongoing • so-called • likewise • nonetheless • levy • invoked • colleagues • depression • collapse •