**What Is Academic Writing?**

Academic writing is the formal writing style used in colleges and universities. It’s what students are expected to produce for classes and what professors and academic researchers use to write scholarly materials. High schools sometimes require academic writing style in certain classes.

**Definition**

Academic writing refers to a style of expression that researchers use to define the intellectual boundaries of their disciplines and specific areas of expertise. Characteristics of academic writing include a formal tone, use of the third-person rather than first-person perspective (usually), a clear focus on the research problem under investigation, and precise word choice. Like specialist languages adopted in other professions, such as, law or medicine, academic writing is designed to convey agreed meaning about complex ideas or concepts for a group of scholarly experts.

**Writing for Higher Education**

A simple academic writing definition is hard to come by because there are many types and forms of academic writing, produced for a variety of reasons.

Different types of academic writing include:

* [abstract](https://examples.yourdictionary.com/effective-research-abstract-examples.html)
* annotated bibliography
* academic j[ournal article](https://grammar.yourdictionary.com/style-and-usage/effective-academic-journal-writing.html)
* book report
* conference paper
* dissertation
* essay
* explication
* literary criticism
* research paper
* [research proposal](https://grammar.yourdictionary.com/grammar-rules-and-tips/how-do-you-write-a-research-proposal-for-academic-writing.html)
* textbook
* thesis

While this is not an exhaustive list of every possible form academic writing can take, it does contain the most common types.

**Key Characteristics of Academic Writing**

While specific requirements may vary based on the particular form of academic writing or the class or publication for which a work is produced, some characteristics are common to all academic writing.

* **formal tone** - A formal tone is always used in academic writing. It is not lighthearted or conversational in tone. Slang and clichés do not belong in this type of writing.
* **precise language**- In keeping with the formal tone, it’s important to choose precise language that very clearly conveys the author’s meaning.
* **point-of-view (POV)** - Academic writing is usually written in [third person POV](https://examples.yourdictionary.com/examples-of-writing-in-third-person.html) because its focus is to educate on the facts rather than to support an opinion or give advice.
* **research focus**- Because most academic writing involves reporting research results, it tends to focus on the specific research question(s) being studied.
* **organization** - Academic writing should be organized logically in a linear, matter-of-fact fashion. Use headings to delineate each major section.
* **source citations** - Most academic writing includes at least some [secondary research sources](https://grammar.yourdictionary.com/grammar/writing/finding-credible-sources.html). Be sure to properly cite all sources and [include a bibliography](https://examples.yourdictionary.com/bibliography-examples.html).

Of course, individual assignments may sometimes have different requirements. Always review submission guidelines carefully to verify you are following the proper format and style.

Academic Writing Structure

Papers written in an academic style have at least three distinct sections: the introduction, body and conclusion.

**Introduction**

In the introduction, you must grab the reader's attention and identify the thesis of the paper. Depending on the type of paper you are writing, there are several appropriate [hook approaches](https://grammar.yourdictionary.com/grammar/writing/how-to-write-a-hook.html) to consider for the introduction. Consider beginning your introduction with one of the following options:

* statement of the [research question](https://examples.yourdictionary.com/examples-of-good-and-bad-research-questions.html)
* declaration of the work’s primary focus
* relevant quote from a famous work or person
* some interesting facts or statistics
* [operational definition](https://www.yourdictionary.com/operationalize) of important terms related to the work

Example introduction for an academic paper:

The purpose of this paper is to explore the themes discussed in *The Metamorphosis* (Kafka, 1915). An example of [surrealist literature](https://examples.yourdictionary.com/surrealism-in-literature-characteristics-and-examples.html), this book is much more than a classic story about a man who transitions into an insect. The primary theme of this work relates to the dehumanization of man in a capitalistic society. This paper will provide specific examples from the text that relate to the notion that, in a capitalist system, the value of an individual is inextricably linked to the person’s ability to bring in an income.

**Body**

This is the main part of the work. The paragraphs must be clearly written and arranged in a logical order. For example, it could be arranged chronologically or in order of importance.

* The first sentence in each paragraph should link to the preceding paragraph so the whole section flows smoothly.
* Within each paragraph, the sentences need to flow and refer back to the topic.
* Achieve cohesion by repeating important words, using synonyms for the main subject, and using transitional words (like however, such as, therefore, and for example).

Example excerpt from the body of an academic paper:

While the terms diversity and inclusion are sometimes used interchangeably, they do not have the same meaning. Diversity is about the state of being different, while inclusion addresses the extent to which people are truly included. Diversity and inclusion are certainly closely associated with one another, but they are different constructs that have different implications in the workplace.

Whether the staff of a company in the United States is diverse is related to whether or not the employer complies with equal employment opportunity (EEO) laws and regulations. If the diversity that exists in the larger population relative to the types of jobs for which a company hires is not represented in the workplace, that may be an indicator of discriminatory hiring practices. Companies with an appropriately diverse employee population are likely complying with EEO requirements, but that doesn’t necessarily mean they’re inclusive.

In determining if a workplace is inclusive, it’s important to consider whether all of the organization’s employees are truly valued, welcomed and respected for who they really are – not in spite of their differences, but because of who they are, differences and all. A company that has a diverse employee population, yet expects workers to leave part of their true selves at home when they come to work is one that does not have an inclusive work environment.

**Conclusion**

The purpose of the conclusion is to cleanly bring the paper to a close for readers. It should reiterate the thesis and summarize the main points or findings. If the paper is summarizing the results of a research study, it is generally best to suggest an area for further research or study, based on the conclusions presented.

Conclusion example appropriate for an academic paper:

With regards to the question of whether or not fear appeals are effective in advertising focused on preventing substance, the results of this study seem to indicate that such messages may actually have no impact on behavior. The results indicate that, while viewers do find such messages to be frightening, they tend to tune out the messages rather than attending to them. These findings suggest that such messages may create cognitive dissonance that keeps them from being effective. More study is needed to explore this possibility.

**Importance of Good Academic Writing**

The accepted form of academic writing in the social sciences can vary considerable depending on the methodological framework and the intended audience. However, most college-level research papers require careful attention to the following stylistic elements:

**I. The Big Picture**

Unlike fiction or journalistic writing, the overall structure of academic writing is formal and logical. It must be cohesive and possess a logically organized flow of ideas; this means that the various parts are connected to form a unified whole. There should be narrative links between sentences and paragraphs so that the reader is able to follow your argument. The introduction should include a description of how the rest of the paper is organized and all sources are properly cited throughout the paper.

**II. Tone**

The overall tone refers to the attitude conveyed in a piece of writing. Throughout your paper, it is important that you present the arguments of others fairly and with an appropriate narrative tone. When presenting a position or argument that you disagree with, describe this argument accurately and without loaded or biased language. In academic writing, the author is expected to investigate the research problem from an authoritative point of view. You should, therefore, state the strengths of your arguments confidently, using language that is neutral, not confrontational or dismissive.

**III. Diction**

Diction refers to the choice of words you use. Awareness of the words you use is important because words that have almost the same denotation [dictionary definition] can have very different connotations [implied meanings]. This is particularly true in academic writing because words and terminology can evolve a nuanced meaning that describes a particular idea, concept, or phenomenon derived from the epistemological culture of that discipline [e.g., the concept of rational choice in political science]. Therefore, use concrete words [not general] that convey a specific meaning. If this cannot be done without confusing the reader, then you need to explain what you mean within the context of how that word or phrase is used within a discipline.

**IV. Language**

The investigation of research problems in the social sciences is often complex and multi-dimensional. Therefore, it is important that you use unambiguous language. Well-structured paragraphs and clear topic sentences enable a reader to follow your line of thinking without difficulty. Your language should be concise, formal, and express precisely what you want it to mean. Do not use vague expressions that are not specific or precise enough for the reader to derive exact meaning ["they," "we," "people," "the organization," etc.], abbreviations like 'i.e.' ["in other words"], 'e.g.' ["for example"], or 'a.k.a.' ["also known as"], and the use of unspecific determinate words ["super," "very," "incredible," "huge," etc.].

**V. Punctuation**

Scholars rely on precise words and language to establish the narrative tone of their work and, therefore, punctuation marks are used very deliberately. For example, exclamation points are rarely used to express a heightened tone because it can come across as unsophisticated or over-excited. Dashes should be limited to the insertion of an explanatory comment in a sentence, while hyphens should be limited to connecting prefixes to words [e.g., multi-disciplinary] or when forming compound phrases [e.g., commander-in-chief]. Finally, understand that semi-colons represent a pause that is longer than a comma, but shorter than a period in a sentence. In general, there are four grammatical uses of semi-colons: when a second clause expands or explains the first clause; to describe a sequence of actions or different aspects of the same topic; placed before clauses which begin with "nevertheless", "therefore", "even so," and "for instance”; and, to mark off a series of phrases or clauses which contain commas. If you are not confident about when to use semi-colons [and most of the time, they are not required for proper punctuation], rewrite using shorter sentences or revise the paragraph.

**VI. Academic Conventions**

Citing sources in the body of your paper and providing a list of references as either footnotes or endnotes is a very important aspect of academic writing. It is essential to always acknowledge the source of any ideas, research findings, data, paraphrased, or quoted text that you have used in your paper as a defense against allegations of plagiarism. Equally important, the scholarly convention of citing sources allow readers to identify the resources you used in writing your paper so they can independently verify and assess the quality of findings and conclusions based on your review of the literature. Examples of other academic conventions to follow include the appropriate use of headings and subheadings, properly spelling out acronyms when first used in the text, avoiding slang or colloquial language, avoiding emotive language or unsupported declarative statements, avoiding contractions, and using first person and second person pronouns only when necessary.

**VII. Evidence-Based Reasoning**

Assignments often ask you to express your own point of view about the research problem. However, what is valued in academic writing is that opinions are based on what is often termed, evidence-based reasoning, a sound understanding of the pertinent body of knowledge and academic debates that exist within, and often external to, your discipline. You need to support your opinion with evidence from scholarly sources. It should be an objective stance presented as a logical argument. The quality of your evidence will determine the strength of your argument. The challenge is to convince the reader of the validity of your opinion through a well-documented, coherent, and logically structured piece of writing. This is particularly important when proposing solutions to problems or delineating recommended courses of action.

**VIII. Thesis-Driven**

Academic writing is “thesis-driven,” meaning that the starting point is a particular perspective, idea, or position applied to the chosen topic of investigation, such as, establishing, proving, or disproving solutions to the research questions posed for the topic. Note that a problem statement without the research questions does not qualify as academic writing because simply identifying the research problem does not establish for the reader how you will contribute to solving the problem, what aspects you believe are most critical, or suggest a method for gathering data to better understand the problem.

**IX. Complexity and Higher-Order Thinking**

Academic writing addresses complex issues that require higher-order thinking skills applied to understanding the research problem [e.g., critical, reflective, logical, and creative thinking as opposed to, for example, descriptive or prescriptive thinking]. Higher-order thinking skills include cognitive processes that are used to comprehend, solve problems, and express concepts or that describe abstract ideas that cannot be easily acted out, pointed to, or shown with images. Think of your writing this way: One of the most important attributes of a good teacher is the ability to explain complexity in a way that is understandable and relatable to the topic being presented. This is also one of the main functions of academic writing--examining and explaining the significance of complex ideas as clearly as possible. As a writer, you must adopt the role of a good teacher by summarizing a lot of complex information into a well-organized synthesis of ideas, concepts, and recommendations that contribute to a better understanding of the research problem.

**Strategies for...**

**Understanding Academic Writing and Its Jargon**

The very definition of jargon is language specific to a particular sub-group of people. Therefore, in modern university life, jargon represents the specific language and meaning assigned to words and phrases specific to a discipline or area of study. For example, the idea of being rational may hold the same general meaning in both political science and psychology, but its application to understanding and explaining phenomena within the research domain of a each discipline may have subtle differences based upon how scholars in that discipline apply the concept to the theories and practice of their work.

Given this, it is important that specialist terminology [i.e., jargon] must be used accurately and applied under the appropriate conditions. Subject-specific dictionaries are the best places to confirm the meaning of terms within the context of a specific discipline. These can be found by either searching in the USC Libraries catalog by entering the disciplinary and the word dictionary [e.g., sociology and dictionary] or using a database such as Credo Reference. It is appropriate for you to use specialist language within your field of study, but you should avoid using such language when writing for non-academic or general audiences.

**Problems with Opaque Writing**

It's not unheard of for scholars to utilize needlessly complex syntax or overly expansive vocabulary that is impenetrable or not well-defined. When writing, avoid problems associated with opaque writing by keeping in mind the following:

**1. Excessive use of specialized terminology:** Yes, it is appropriate for you to use specialist language and a formal style of expression in academic writing, but it does not mean using "big words" just for the sake of doing so. Overuse of complex or obscure words or writing complicated sentence constructions gives readers the impression that your paper is more about style than substance; it leads the reader to question if you really know what you are talking about. Focus on creating clear and elegant prose that minimizes reliance on specialized terminology.

**2. Inappropriate use of specialized terminology**: Because you are dealing with concepts, research, and data within your discipline, you need to use the technical language appropriate to that area of study. However, nothing will undermine the validity of your study quicker than the inappropriate application of a term or concept. Avoid using terms whose meaning you are unsure of--don't just guess or assume! Consult the meaning of terms in specialized, discipline-specific dictionaries by searching the USC Libraries catalog or reference database [see above].

**Additional Problems to Avoid**

In addition to understanding the use of specialized language, there are other aspects of academic writing in the social sciences that you should be aware of. These problems include:

**Personal nouns:** Excessive use of personal nouns [e.g., I, me, you, us] may lead the reader to believe the study was overly subjective. These words can be interpreted as being used only to avoid presenting empirical evidence about the research problem. Limit the use of personal nouns to descriptions of things you actually did [e.g., "I interviewed ten teachers about classroom management techniques..."]. Note that personal nouns are generally found in the discussion section of a paper because this is where you as the author/researcher interpret and describe your work.

**Directives:** Avoid directives that demand the reader to "do this" or "do that." Directives should be framed as evidence-based recommendations or goals leading to specific outcomes.

**Informal, conversational tone using slang and idioms:** Academic writing relies on excellent grammar and precise word structure. Your narrative should not include regional dialects or slang terms because they can be open to interpretation; be direct and concise using standard English.

**Wordiness:** Focus on being concise, straightforward, and developing a narrative that does not have confusing language. By doing so, you help eliminate the possibility of the reader misinterpreting the design and purpose of your study.

**Vague expressions** (e.g., "they," "we," "people," "the company," "that area," etc.): Being concise in your writing also includes avoiding vague references to persons, places, or things. While proofreading your paper, be sure to look for and edit any vague or imprecise statements that lack context or specificity.

**Numbered lists and bulleted items:** The use of bulleted items or lists should be used only if the narrative dictates a need for clarity. For example, it is fine to state, "The four main problems with hedge funds are:" and then list them as 1, 2, 3, 4. However, in academic writing, this must then be followed by detailed explanation and analysis of each item. Given this, the question you should ask yourself while proofreading is: why begin with a list in the first place rather than just starting with systematic analysis of each item arranged in separate paragraphs? Also, be careful using numbers because they can imply a ranked order of priority or importance. If none exists, use bullets and avoid checkmarks or other symbols.

**Descriptive writing:** Describing a research problem is an important means of contextualizing a study. In fact, some description or background information may be needed because you cannot assume the reader knows everything about the topic. However, the content of your paper should focus on methodology, the analysis and interpretation of findings, and their implications as they apply to the research problem rather than background information and descriptions of tangential issues.

**Personal experience:** Drawing upon personal experience [e.g., traveling abroad; caring for someone with Alzheimer's disease] can be an effective way of introducing the research problem or engaging your readers in understanding its significance. Use personal experience only as an example, though, because academic writing relies on evidence-based research. To do otherwise is simply story-telling.

**NOTE:** Rules concerning excellent grammar and precise word structure do not apply when quoting someone. A quote should be inserted in the text of your paper exactly as it was stated. If the quote is especially vague or hard to understand, consider paraphrasing it or using a different quote to convey the same meaning. Consider inserting the term "sic" in brackets after the quoted word or phrase to indicate that the quotation has been transcribed exactly as found in the original source, but the source has grammar, spelling, or other errors. The adverb sic informs the reader that the errors are not yours.

**Structure and Writing Style**

**I. Improving Academic Writing**

To improve your academic writing skills, you should focus your efforts on three key areas:

**1. Clear Writing:** The act of thinking about precedes the process of writing about. Good writers spend sufficient time distilling information and reviewing major points from the literature they have reviewed before creating their work. Writing detailed outlines can help you clearly organize your thoughts. Effective academic writing begins with solid planning, so manage your time carefully.

**2. Excellent Grammar:** Needless to say, English grammar can be difficult and complex; even the best scholars take many years before they have a command of the major points of good grammar. Take the time to learn the major and minor points of good grammar. Spend time practicing writing and seek detailed feedback from professors.

Refer to these three basic resources to help your grammar and writing skills:

* A good writing reference book, such as, Strunk and White’s book, The Elements of Style or the St. Martin's Handbook on Academic Writing;
* A college-level dictionary, such as, Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary;
* The latest edition of Roget's Thesaurus in Dictionary Form.

**3. Consistent Stylistic Approach:** Whether your professor expresses a preference to use MLA, APA or the Chicago Manual of Style or not, choose one style manual and stick to it. Each of these style manuals provide rules on how to write out numbers, references, citations, footnotes, and lists. Consistent adherence to a style of writing helps with the narrative flow of your paper and improves its readability. Note that some disciplines require a particular style [e.g., education uses APA] so as you write more papers within your major, your familiarity with it will improve.

**II. Evaluating Quality of Writing**

A useful approach for evaluating the quality of your academic writing is to consider the following issues from the perspective of the reader. While proofreading your final draft, critically assess the following elements in your writing.

* It is shaped around one clear research problem, and it explains what that problem is from the outset.
* Your paper tells the reader why the problem is important and why people should know about it.
* You have accurately and thoroughly informed the reader what has already been published about this problem or others related to it and noted important gaps in the research.
* You have provided evidence to support your argument that the reader finds convincing.
* The paper includes a description of how and why particular evidence was collected and analyzed, and why specific theoretical arguments or concepts were used.
* The paper is made up of paragraphs, each containing only one controlling idea.
* You indicate how each section of the paper addresses the research problem.
* You have considered counter-arguments or counter-examples where they are relevant.
* Arguments, evidence, and their significance have been presented in the conclusion.
* Limitations of your research have been explained as evidence of the potential need for further study.
* The narrative flows in a clear, accurate, and well-organized way.

Boscoloa, Pietro, Barbara Arféb, and Mara Quarisaa. “Improving the Quality of Students' Academic Writing: An Intervention Study.” Studies in Higher Education 32 (August 2007): 419-438;

**Writing Tip**

**Considering the Passive Voice in Academic Writing**

In the English language, we are able to construct sentences in the following way:

1. "The policies of Congress caused the economic crisis."

2. "The economic crisis was caused by the policies of Congress."

The decision about which sentence to use is governed by whether you want to focus on “Congress” and what they did, or on “the economic crisis” and what caused it. This choice in focus is achieved with the use of either the active or the passive voice. When you want your readers to focus on the "doer" of an action, you can make the "doer"' the subject of the sentence and use the active form of the verb. When you want readers to focus on the person, place, or thing affected by the action, or the action itself, you can make the effect or the action the subject of the sentence by using the passive form of the verb.

Often in academic writing, scholars don't want to focus on who is doing an action, but on who is receiving or experiencing the consequences of that action. The passive voice is useful in academic writing because it allows writers to highlight the most important participants or events within sentences by placing them at the beginning of the sentence.

**Use the passive voice when:**

* You want to focus on the person, place, or thing affected by the action, or the action itself;
* It is not important who or what did the action;
* You want to be impersonal or more formal.

**Form the passive voice by:**

* Turning the object of the active sentence into the subject of the passive sentence.
* Changing the verb to a passive form by adding the appropriate form of the verb "to be" and the past participle of the main verb.

NOTE: Consult with your professor about using the passive voice before submitting your research paper. Some strongly discourage its use!