

Academic writing or scholarly **writing** is nonfiction **writing** produced as part of **academic** work. **Writing** that reports on university research, **writing** produced by university students, and **writing** in which scholars analyze culture or propose new theories are all sometimes described as **academic writing**.

Types of academic writing

The four main types of academic writing are **descriptive, analytical, persuasive and critical**. Each of these types of writing has specific language features and purposes.

In many academic texts you will need to use more than one type. For example, in an empirical thesis:

- you will use critical writing in the literature review to show where there is a gap or opportunity in the existing research
- the methods section will be mostly descriptive to summarise the methods used to collect and analyse information
- the results section will be mostly descriptive and analytical as you report on the data you collected
- the discussion section is more analytical, as you relate your findings back to your research questions, and also persuasive, as you propose your interpretations of the findings.

Descriptive

The simplest type of academic writing is descriptive. Its purpose is to provide facts or information. An example would be a summary of an article or a report of the results of an experiment.

The kinds of instructions for a purely descriptive assignment include: 'identify', 'report', 'record', 'summarise' and 'define'.

Analytical

It's rare for a university-level text to be purely descriptive. Most academic writing is also analytical. Analytical writing includes descriptive writing, but also requires you to re-organise the facts and information you describe into categories, groups, parts, types or relationships.

Sometimes, these categories or relationships are already part of the discipline, while in other cases you will create them specifically for your text. If you're comparing two theories, you might break your comparison into several parts, for example: how each theory deals with social context, how each theory deals with language learning, and how each theory can be used in practice.

The kinds of instructions for an analytical assignment include: 'analyse', 'compare', 'contrast', 'relate', and 'examine'.

To make your writing more analytical:

- spend plenty of time planning. Brainstorm the facts and ideas, and try different ways of grouping them, according to patterns, parts, similarities and differences. You could use colour-coding, flow charts, tree diagrams or tables.
- create a name for the relationships and categories you find. For example, advantages and disadvantages.
- build each section and paragraph around one of the analytical categories.
- make the structure of your paper clear to your reader, by using topic sentences and a clear introduction.

Persuasive

In most academic writing, you are required to go at least one step further than analytical writing, to persuasive writing. Persuasive writing has all the features of analytical writing (that is, information plus re-organising the information), with the addition of your own point of view. Most essays are persuasive, and there is a persuasive element in at least the discussion and conclusion of a research article.

Points of view in academic writing can include an argument, recommendation, interpretation of findings or evaluation of the work of others. In persuasive writing, each claim you make needs to be supported by some evidence, for example a reference to research findings or published sources.

The kinds of instructions for a persuasive assignment include: 'argue', 'evaluate', 'discuss', and 'take a position'.

To help reach your own point of view on the facts or ideas:

- read some other researchers' points of view on the topic. Who do you feel is the most convincing?
- look for patterns in the data or references. Where is the evidence strongest?
- list several different interpretations. What are the real-life implications of each one? Which ones are likely to be most useful or beneficial? Which ones have some problems?
- discuss the facts and ideas with someone else. Do you agree with their point of view?

To develop your argument:

- list the different reasons for your point of view
- think about the different types and sources of evidence which you can use to support your point of view
- consider different ways that your point of view is similar to, and different from, the points of view of other researchers
- look for various ways to break your point of view into parts. For example, cost effectiveness, environmental sustainability, scope of real-world application.

To present your argument, make sure:

- your text develops a coherent argument where all the individual claims work together to support your overall point of view
- your reasoning for each claim is clear to the reader
- your assumptions are valid
- you have evidence for every claim you make
- you use evidence that is convincing and directly relevant.

Critical

Critical writing is common for research, postgraduate and advanced undergraduate writing. It has all the features of persuasive writing, with the added feature of at least one other point of view.

While persuasive writing requires you to have your own point of view on an issue or topic, critical writing requires you to consider at least two points of view, including your own.

For example, you may explain a researcher's interpretation or argument and then evaluate the merits of the argument, or give your own alternative interpretation.

Examples of critical writing assignments include a critique of a journal article, or a literature review that identifies the strengths and weaknesses of existing research. The kinds of instructions for critical writing include: 'critique', 'debate', 'disagree' and 'evaluate'.

You need to:

- accurately summarise all or part of the work. This could include identifying the main interpretations, assumptions or methodology.
- have an opinion about the work. Appropriate types of opinion could include pointing out some problems with it, proposing an alternative approach that would be better, and/or defending the work against the critiques of others.
- provide evidence for your point of view. Depending on the specific assignment and the discipline, different types of evidence may be appropriate, such as logical reasoning, reference to authoritative sources and/or research data.

Critical writing requires strong writing skills. You need to thoroughly understand the topic and the issues. You need to [develop an essay structure](#) and paragraph structure that allows you to analyse different interpretations and develop your own argument, supported by evidence.

Features of academic writing

Introduction

Academic writing in English is linear, which means it has one central point or theme with every part contributing to the main line of argument, without digressions or repetitions. Its objective is to inform rather than entertain. As well as this it is in the standard written form of the language. There are ten main features of academic writing that are often discussed. Academic writing is to some extent: complex, formal, objective, explicit, hedged, and responsible. It uses language precisely and accurately. It is also well organized and planned.

Complexity

Written language is relatively more complex than spoken language (Biber, 1988; Biber, Johansson, Leech, Conrad & Finegan, 1999; Chafe, 1982; Cook, 1997; Halliday, 1989).

Written texts are lexically dense compared to spoken language - they have proportionately more lexical words than grammatical words. Written texts are shorter and have longer, more complex words and phrases. They have more noun-based phrases, more nominalisations, and more lexical variation.

Written language is grammatically more complex than spoken language. It has more subordinate clauses, more "that/to" complement clauses, more long sequences of prepositional phrases, more attributive adjectives and more passives than spoken language.

The following features are common in academic written texts:

Noun-based phrases, Subordinate clauses/embedding, Complement clauses, Sequences of prepositional phrases, Participles, Passive verbs, Lexical density, Lexical complexity, Nominalisation, Attributive adjectives, Adjectival groups as complements

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Examples

Halliday (1989, p.79) compares a sentence from a spoken text:

You can control the trains this way and if you do that you can be quite sure that they'll be able to run more safely and more quickly than they would otherwise, no matter how bad the weather gets.

with a typical written variant:

The use of this method of control unquestionably leads to safer and faster train running in the most adverse weather conditions.

The main difference is the grammar, not the vocabulary.

Other equivalents are given below (p.81):

Spoken	Written
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Whenever I'd visited there before, I'd ended up feeling that it would be futile if I tried to do anything more.	Every previous visit had left me with a sense of the futility of further action on my part.
The cities in Switzerland had once been peaceful, but they changed when people became violent.	Violence changed the face of once peaceful Swiss cities.
Because the technology has improved its less risky than it used to be when you install them at the same time, and it doesn't cost so much either.	Improvements in technology have reduced the risks and high costs associated with simultaneous installation.
The people in the colony rejoiced when it was promised that things would change in this way.	Opinion in the colony greeted the promised change with enthusiasm.

Formality

In general this means in an essay that you should avoid:

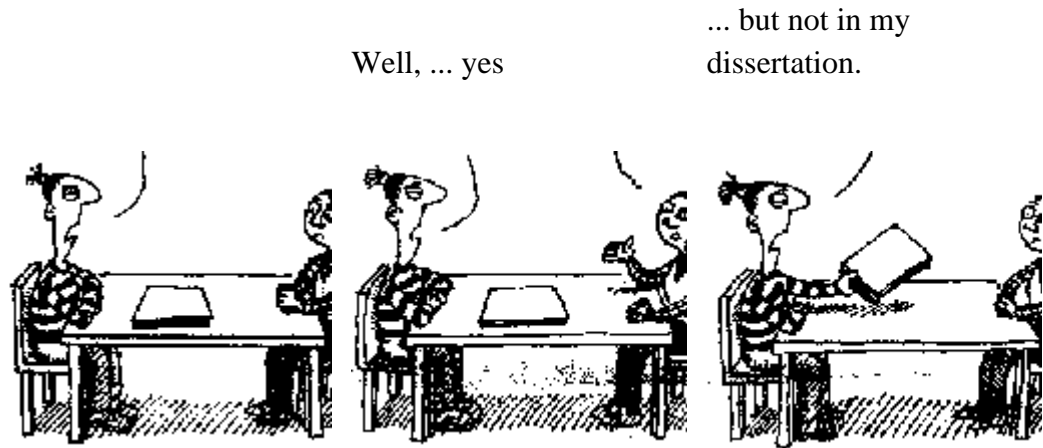
- a. colloquial words and expressions; ""stuff", "a lot of", "thing", "sort of",
- b. abbreviated forms: "can't", "doesn't", "shouldn't"
- c. two word verbs: "put off", "bring up"
- d. sub-headings, numbering and bullet-points in formal essays - but use them in reports.
- e. asking questions.

Julie, I'm your practice teacher, you're my student. And I have to tell you to refrain from using terms such as "loony", "fruitcake" "nutcase" and "one sandwich short of a picnic" to describe

Oh, come on, Clare!
Don't be so PC. Are you telling me you've never used those expressions?

CRITIC IN THE COMMUNITY

people with mental
illness.



Precision

In academic writing you need to be precise when you use information, dates or figures. Do not use "a lot of people" when you can say "50 million people".

For example:

Chemists had attempted to synthesize quinine for the previous **hundred** years but all they had achieved was to discover the extreme complexity of the problem.

The volatile oily liquid beta-chloro-beta-ethyl sulphide was first synthesized in **1854**, and in **1887** it was reported to produce blisters if it touched the skin. It was called mustard gas and was used at Ypres in **1917**, when it caused many **thousands** of casualties.

It is approximately **eight** inches in length and runs from the urinary bladder, through the prostate gland, under the front of the pelvis, and, passing through the corpus spongiosum, it ends at the tip of the glans penis in an opening called the *urethral meatus* .

Objectivity

This means that the main emphasis should be on the information that you want to give and the arguments you want to make, rather than you. This is related to the basic nature of academic

study and academic writing, in particular. Nobody really wants to know what you "think" or "believe". They want to know what you have studied and learned and how this has led you to your various conclusions. The thoughts and beliefs should be based on your lectures, reading, discussion and research and it is important to make this clear.

1. Compare these two paragraphs:

The question of what constitutes "language proficiency" and the nature of its cross-lingual dimensions is also at the core of many hotly debated issues in the areas of bilingual education and second language pedagogy and testing. Researchers have suggested ways of making second language teaching and testing more "communicative" (e.g., Canale and Swain, 1980; Oller, 1979b) on the grounds that a communicative approach better reflects the nature of language proficiency than one which emphasizes the acquisition of discrete language skills.

We don't really know what language proficiency is but many people have talked about it for a long time. Some researchers have tried to find ways for us to make teaching and testing more communicative because that is how language works. I think that language is something we use for communicating, not an object for us to study and we remember that when we teach and test it.

Which is the most objective?

2. In general, avoid words like "I", "me", "myself".

A reader will normally assume that any idea not referenced is your own. It is therefore unnecessary to make this explicit.

Don't write: "In my opinion, this a very interesting study."

Write: "This is a very interesting study."

Avoid "you" to refer to the reader or people in general.

Don't write: "You can easily forget how different life was 50 years ago."

Write: "It is easy to forget how difficult life was 50 years ago."

3. Examples

Clearly this was far less true of France than ...

This is where the disagreements and controversies begin ...

The data indicates that ...

This is not a view shared by everyone; Jones, for example, claims that ...

...very few people would claim ...

It is worthwhile at this stage to consider ...

Of course, more concrete evidence is needed before ...

Several possibilities emerge ...

A common solution is ...

Explicitness

Academic writing is explicit in several ways.

1. It is explicit in its signposting of the organisation of the ideas in the text (Biber, Johansson, Leech, Conrad & Finegan, 1999, pp. 880-882). As a writer of academic English, it is your responsibility to make it clear to your reader how various parts of the text are related. These connections can be made explicit by the use of different signalling words.

For example, if you want to tell your reader that your line of argument is going to change, make it clear.

The Bristol 167 was to be Britain's great new advance on American types such as the Lockheed Constellation and Douglas DC-6, which did not have the range to fly the Atlantic non-stop. It was also to be the largest aircraft ever built in Britain. **However**, even by the end of the war, the design had run into serious difficulties.

If you think that one sentence gives reasons for something in another sentence, make it explicit.

While an earlier generation of writers had noted this feature of the period, it was not until the recent work of Cairncross that the significance of this outflow was realized. Partly this was **because** the current account deficit appears much smaller in current (1980s) data than it was thought to be by contemporaries.

If you think two ideas are almost the same, say so.

Marx referred throughout his work to other systems than the capitalist system, especially those which he knew from the history of Europe to have preceded capitalism; systems such as feudalism, where the relation of production was characterized by the personal relation of the feudal lord and his serf and a relation of subordination which came from the lord's control of the land. Similarly, Marx was interested in slavery and in the classical Indian and Chinese social systems, or in those systems where the ties of local community are all important.

If you intend your sentence to give extra information, make it clear.

He is born into a family, he marries into a family, and he becomes the husband and father of his own family. In addition, he has a definite place of origin and more relatives than he knows what to do with, and he receives a rudimentary education at the Canadian Mission School.

If you are giving examples, do it explicitly.

This has sometimes led to disputes between religious and secular clergy, between orders and bishops. For example, in the Northern context, the previous bishop of Down and Connor, Dr Philbin, refused for most of his period of leadership in Belfast to have Jesuits visiting or residing in his diocese.

For more information see [Writing Paragraphs: Signalling](#).

2. It is explicit in its acknowledgment of the sources of the ideas in the text.

If you know the source of the ideas you are presenting, acknowledge it.

Do THIS in academic writing

McGreil (1977: 363-408) has shown that though Dubliners find the English more acceptable than the Northern Irish, Dubliners still seek a solution to the Northern problem within an all-Ireland state.

NOT

Although Dubliners find the English more acceptable than the Northern Irish, Dubliners still seek a solution to the Northern problem within an all-Ireland state.

NOT

Researchers have shown that though Dubliners find the English more acceptable than the Northern Irish, Dubliners still seek a solution to the Northern problem within an all-Ireland state.

Accuracy

In academic writing you need to be accurate in your use of vocabulary. Do not confuse, for example, "phonetics" and "phonology" or "grammar" with "syntax".

Choose the correct word, for example, "meeting", "assembly", "gathering" or "conference".

Or from: "money", "cash", "currency", "capital" or "funds".

You also need to be accurate in your use of grammar.

Hedging

It is often believed that academic writing, particularly scientific writing, is factual, simply to convey facts and information. However it is now recognised that an important feature of academic writing is the concept of cautious language, often called "hedging" or "vague language". In other words, it is necessary to make decisions about your stance on a particular subject, or the strength of the claims you are making. Different subjects prefer to do this in different ways.

Language used in hedging:

1. Introductory verbs: e.g. seem, tend, look like, appear to be, think, believe, doubt, be sure, indicate, suggest
2. Certain lexical verbs e.g. believe, assume, suggest
3. Certain modal verbs: e.g. will, must, would, may, might, could
4. Adverbs of frequency e.g. often, sometimes, usually
4. Modal adverbs e.g. certainly, definitely, clearly, probably, possibly, perhaps, conceivably,
5. Modal adjectives e.g. certain, definite, clear, probable, possible
6. Modal nouns e.g. assumption, possibility, probability

7. That clauses e.g. It could be the case that .
 e.g. It might be suggested that .
 e.g. There is every hope that .
8. To-clause + e.g. It may be possible to obtain .
 adjective e.g. It is important to develop .
 e.g. It is useful to study .

EXAMPLES

Compare the following:

1. It may be said that the commitment to some of the social and economic concepts was less strong than it is now.
 The commitment to some of the social and economic concepts was less strong than it is now.
2. The lives they chose may seem overly ascetic and self-denying to most women today.
 The lives they chose seem overly ascetic and self-denying to most women today.
3. Weismann suggested that animals become old because, if they did not, there could be no successive replacement of individuals and hence no evolution.
 Weismann proved that animals become old because, if they did not, there could be no successive replacement of individuals and hence no evolution.
4. Yet often it cannot have been the case that a recalcitrant trustee remained in possession of the property entrusted to him.
 Yet a recalcitrant trustee did not remain in possession of the property entrusted to him.
5. Recent work on the religious demography of Northern Ireland indicates a separating out of protestant and catholic, with the catholic population drifting westwards and vice versa.
 Recent work on the religious demography of Northern Ireland shows a separating out of protestant and catholic, with the catholic population drifting westwards and vice versa.
6. By analogy, it may be possible to walk from one point in hilly country to another by a path which is always level or uphill, and yet a straight line between the points would cross a valley.
 By analogy, one can walk from one point in hilly country to another by a path which is always level or uphill, and yet a straight line between the points would cross a valley.
7. There are certainly cases where this would seem to have been the only possible method of transmission.
 There are cases where this would have been the only possible method of transmission.
8. Nowadays the urinary symptoms seem to be of a lesser order.
 Nowadays the urinary symptoms are of a lesser order.

Responsibility

In academic writing you are responsible for demonstrating an understanding of the source text. You must also be responsible for, and must be able to provide evidence and justification for, any claims you make.

This is done by **paraphrasing and summarising** what you read and acknowledging the source of this information or ideas by a system of **citation**.

Organisation

Academic writing is well organised. It flows easily from one section to the next in a logical fashion. A good place to start is the genre of your text. Once you have decided on the genre, the structure is easily determined.

Students are asked to write many different kinds of texts. Depending on your subject, these could be essays, laboratory reports, case-studies, book reviews, reflective diaries, posters, research proposals, and so on and are normally referred to as genre families or genres.

Genres are defined by their purpose, their audience and their structure. Looking at typical structures can help you with your organisation.

The following genres are common in higher education.

1. Essays
2. Reports
3. Case Studies
4. Research proposals
5. Book reviews
6. Brief research reports
7. Literature reviews
8. Reflective writing
9. Introductions
10. Research methods
11. Research results
12. Research discussions
13. Writing conclusions
14. Research abstracts
15. Research dissertations & theses

Which of the above genre families is expected?

A useful start is your brief or assignment title or question.

Planning

Academic writing is well planned. It usually takes place after research and evaluation, according to a specific purpose and plan.

The following procedure is typical when writing an extended essay or assignment.

	Task
1.	Read the question or brief and understand what you are required to do. Think about the subject, the purpose and the audience.
2.	Think about what you know about the subject. Write it down in some way.
3.	Go to the library or internet and find relevant books, articles or websites.
4.	Find the books on your reading list - if you have one - and study them.
5.	Make notes on these books and articles. Record full details of the materials you use.
6.	Organise your piece of work.
7.	Type or write your first draft.
8.	Discuss your first draft informally with friends, other members of your class and your lecturer if possible.
9.	Revise your first draft, bearing in mind any comments that were made in your discussions. Go back to 2. if necessary Produce your second draft.

10.	Proofread your draft.
11.	Produce a final typed version.
12.	Check everything.