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**Module:** foreign language **(English)**

**TD/Class:** 1st yearMaster

**Academic writing**

Academic writing is generally quite [formal](https://www.sydney.edu.au/students/writing.html#formal), [objective(impersonal)](https://www.sydney.edu.au/students/writing.html#objective) and [technical](https://www.sydney.edu.au/students/writing.html#technical). It is formal by avoiding casual or conversational language, such as contractions or informal vocabulary. It is impersonal and objective by avoiding direct reference to people or feelings, and instead emphasising objects, facts and ideas. It is technical by using vocabulary specific to the discipline.

Different disciplines also have different styles and structures of writing. For example, some disciplines, such as in the humanities, expect longer paragraphs, which include topic sentences to show how your argument is structured. Other disciplines, for example in the sciences, expect short paragraphs, with no topic sentences, which are denser in factual information.

To be a good academic writer, you will need to learn the specific styles and structures for your discipline, as well as for each individual writing task. Some ways to do this are to:

* Ask for more information from your lecturer/supervisor/tutor
* Study the writing style of the academic articles in the most prestigious journals in your discipline
* Look at the successful writing by other students in your subject area.

**Formal language**

You can make your writing more formal through the vocabulary that you use. For academic writing:

* Choose formal instead of informal vocabulary. For example, ‘somewhat’ is more formal than ‘a bit’, ‘insufficient’ is more formal than ‘not enough’.
* Avoid contractions. For example, use ‘did not’ rather than ‘didn’t’.
* Avoid emotional language. For example, instead of strong words such as ‘wonderful’ or ‘terrible’, use more moderate words such as ‘helpful’ or ‘problematic’.
* instead of using absolute positives and negatives, such as ‘proof’ or ‘wrong’, use more cautious evaluations, such as ‘strong evidence’ or ‘less convincing’.

**Objective language**

Although academic writing usually requires you to be objective and impersonal (not mentioning personal feelings), often you may still have to present your opinion. For example, you may need to:

* Interpret findings
* Evaluate a theory
* Develop an argument
* Critique the work of others.

To express your point of view and still write in an objective style, you can use the following strategies.

* Move information around in the sentence to emphasise things and ideas, instead of people and feelings. For example, instead of writing ‘I believe the model is valid, based on these findings’, write ‘These findings indicate that the model is valid’.
* Avoid evaluative words that are based on non-technical judgements and feelings. For example, use ‘valid’ or ‘did not demonstrate’ instead of ‘amazing’ or ‘disappointment’.
* Avoid intense or emotional evaluative language. For example, instead of writing ‘Parents who smoke are obviously abusing their children’, write ‘Second-hand smoke has some harmful effects on children’s health’.
* Use modality to show caution about your views, or to allow room for others to disagree. For example, instead of writing ‘I think second-hand smoke causes cancer’, write ‘There is evidence to support the possibility that second-hand smoke increases the risk of cancer’.
* Find authoritative sources, such as authors, researchers and theorists in books or articles, who support your point of view, and refer to them in your writing. For example, instead of writing ‘Language is, in my view, clearly something social’, write ‘As Halliday (1973) argues, language is intrinsically social’.

Different disciplines often have quite different expectations about how objective or subjective your writing can be. For example, in some fields it is fine to use first person, such as 'my view is that...', while in other fields this is not acceptable. You should look at the convention used in published articles in your discipline area, and check with your lecturer.

**Technical language**

As well as using formal language, you also need to write technically. This means that you need to develop a large vocabulary for the concepts specific to the discipline or specialisation you’re writing for. To do this, take note of terminology used by your lecturer and tutor, as well as in your readings.

Be careful about the meaning of technical terms. Often the same word has a different meaning in another discipline. For example, ‘discourse’ is a technical term used in multiple disciplines with different meanings.

Make sure you also understand and use the key categories and relationships in your discipline, that is, the way information and ideas are organised into groups. For example, in the discipline of Law, law is separated into two types: common law and statute law. Knowing these distinctions will help you structure your writing and make it more technical and analytical.

# 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 organised and planned.

### Complexity

Written language is relatively more complex than spoken language. Written language has longer words, it is lexically more dense and it has a more varied vocabulary. It uses more noun-based phrases than verb-based phrases. Written texts are shorter and the language has more grammatical complexity, including more subordinate clauses and more passives.

### Formality

Academic writing is relatively formal. In general this means that in an essay you should avoid colloquial words and expressions.

### Precision

In academic writing, facts and figures are given precisely.

### Objectivity

Written language is in general objective rather than personal. It therefore has fewer words that refer to the writer or the reader. 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. For that reason,  academic writing tends to use nouns (and adjectives), rather than verbs (and adverbs).

### Explicitness

Academic writing is explicit about the relationships int he text. Furthermore, it is the responsibility of the writer in English to make it clear to the reader how the various parts of the text are related. These connections can be made explicit by the use of different signalling words.

### Accuracy

Academic writing uses vocabulary accurately. Most subjects have words with narrow specific meanings. Linguistics distinguishes clearly between "phonetics" and "phonemics"; general English does not.

### Hedging

In any kind of academic writing you do, 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.

A technique common in certain kinds of academic writing is known by linguists as a ‘hedge’.

### Responsibility

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

### 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.

### Planning

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