



How to improve your academic writing

This guide will explain the main characteristics of academic writing and provide several examples of good practice.

What is academic writing?

When you write an assignment or essay, you must use an academic style of writing. This is similar to your own natural style of writing but has several characteristics which set it apart from more informal types of writing.

One of the biggest misconceptions about academic writing is that it uses complex language. This is incorrect, academic writing should be as concise, simple and clear as possible.

The following characteristics are typical of academic writing:

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|--|------------------------------|
| • Use of correct grammar and punctuation | • Uses correct referencing |
| • Uses cautious language | • Clear and concise language |
| • Avoids subjective and emotive language | • Formal writing style |
| • Uses linking words and phrases | • Correct spelling |
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Start reading to develop your academic writing

You will not be expected to write wonderfully written academic arguments straight away.

One of the best ways of developing your academic writing is to read textbooks and journal articles in your area of study. This will help you become familiar with an academic style of writing. Read articles for style as well as content. You could set yourself the task of reading at least one relevant journal article each week.

When reading relevant journals or textbooks try to be aware of the language used and how the author makes use of sentences and paragraphs. The best place to find relevant and appropriate material is **Library Search** and also your reading lists.

You will also receive feedback from tutors on written work you have submitted which will help you to develop your own writing.

Formal writing style

Academic writing is formal in style, not chatty, so do not write as you would on Social Media or when text messaging. Avoid using slang expressions and always write words out in full.

Write words out in full

- **The evidence should not...** rather than **The evidence shouldn't...**
- **Current research did not reflect the findings...** rather than **Current research didn't reflect the findings.**
- **Most modern televisions make use of polymers...** rather than **Most modern TVs make use of polymers...**

Do not use colloquialisms or slang

- The evidence should be taken **with a pinch of salt.**
- The results were as **clear as mud.**

The use of cautious language

Because research and theories are being developed and updated all the time, writers tend to use cautious or tentative language. The language used in academic writing should reflect the amount of strength of evidence to support a topic or claim. This is sometimes called **hedging**. Academic language is therefore usually cautious in nature.

Language that is not cautious

Jennings' (2010) research shows that smoking tobacco causes lung cancer.

Smith's (2011) evidence says that greenhouse gases have an effect on the climate.

Cautious language

Jennings' (2010) research **would appear to show that** smoking tobacco **may** cause lung cancer.

Smith's (2011) evidence **suggests** that greenhouse gases **may** have an effect on the climate.

Use correct punctuation and grammar

Correct use of punctuation is another characteristic of academic writing. Incorrect use of grammar can undermine your assignment or dissertation so it is a good idea to ensure you have an understanding of basic grammar. Knowing how to use correct grammar is a valuable skill for life.

Try to learn and understand the correct use of **full stops**, **commas**, **colons** and **semi colons**, **hyphens** and **apostrophes**. Your tutors may also highlight punctuation or grammar errors in any feedback they give you.

Some of the most common punctuation and grammar mistakes students make include:

- Incorrect use of tenses
- Incorrect use of speech marks
- Incorrect use of single and plural
- Incorrect syntax and sentence structure
- Incorrect use of commas and apostrophes

There are many books available in **Library Search** on punctuation and grammar. **Library Search** is available at: www.northumbria.ac.uk/librarysearch.

Structuring your writing

A well structured piece of writing is important for several reasons. It helps you present your arguments in a logical way and can provide a framework for presenting your findings. The correct use of paragraphs and sentences are vital for a well structured piece of writing. The use of paragraphs and sentences is covered in more details in the **How to plan and structure your essay** helpguide.

Points to remember for good structure:

- Try to group similar ideas and concepts together.
- Use paragraphs to divide different sections up and ensure that each paragraph has a point.
- Use the first sentence of each paragraph to introduce the theme or topic of the paragraph.
- Ensure that your sections and paragraphs flow in a logical manner.

Avoid subjective or emotive language

A key characteristic of academic writing is that it is **objective** and neutral.

Subjective

The residue from the experiment was a beautiful red colour.

Brown's contribution to the field of quantum physics is extremely important because...

Objective

The residue from the experiment was red in colour.

Brown made a significant contribution to the field of quantum physics because...

Writing in the third person

Most academic writing uses the third person, in other words the writer does not use 'I'. This helps to ensure the writing stays objective. If you are writing a personal reflection or a reflective report, then you may be required to write in the first person but check with your tutor first.

Examples

This essay will discuss the effect of...
It could be argued that...

The researcher found that the results seemed to indicate...
The results appeared to show...

Precise and concise language

Academic writing is precise and not vague. Do not be tempted to add extra 'big' words to your assignment to make it appear more academic. Your writing should be as concise as possible. Do not try to use extra words just to increase your word count.

Not precise

The earthquake was strong.
A cupful of methanol was added to the solution.

Precise

The earthquake measured 6.4 on the Richter scale.
400ml of methanol was added to the solution.

Not concise

Owing to the fact that wet weather can contribute towards erosion in metals...

Concise

Because wet weather can contribute towards erosion in metals...

Useful phrases and linking words

In academic writing, you will need to compare, contrast and explain different ideas and concepts. The phrases below are examples you can use to compare, contrast, introduce and report results or information. You will encounter these, or similar phrases, as you begin to read more journal articles and textbooks.

The [Signposting Language](#) helpguide on Skills Plus provides phrases and linking words you can use in your own academic writing.

There are some examples below:

Words used to compare and contrast

Equally...	Likewise...	It appears that...	Similarly...
However...	On the contrary...	Despite being...	On the other hand...

Words used to show examples and draw conclusions

For example...	As can be seen...	This demonstrates...	For instance...
To summarise...	In conclusion...	In other words...	Finally...

Words used to present an author's work. These are useful when using in-text citations.

Kitchin (2017) argued that...	Emary (2017) estimated...	Roll (2016) stated that...
DeMille (2009) concluded...	Donkin (2017) believed that...	King (2014) suggested...

Referencing and bibliographies

A key characteristic of academic writing is referencing any sources that you use. Referencing usually involves creating an in-text citation and a reference list.

An **in-text citation** is how you refer to, or cite, an author in your own writing. A **reference list** goes at the end of your assignment and is a complete list of all the resources you have referred to in your writing. The University uses several different referencing styles, we recommend you consult your tutor to clarify which style you should use.

A **bibliography** contains everything that is in your reference list along with other resources you may have read but have not referred to directly in your writing. For this reason, your bibliography is always longer than your reference list.

Further reading and useful links

- Northumbria University (2012) *Northumbria Skills Plus*. Available at: <http://www.northumbria.ac.uk/skillsplus> (Accessed: 30 July 2018).
- University of Bristol (2012) *Improve your writing*. Available at: http://www.bristol.ac.uk/arts/exercises/grammar/grammar_tutorial/index.htm (Accessed: 30 July 2018).
- Northumbria University (2016) *Academic writing - signposting language*. Available at: <http://nuweb2.northumbria.ac.uk/library/skillsplus/loader.html?55388788> (Accessed: 15 January 2019).
- Northumbria University (2016) *Plan and structure your essay*. Available at: <http://nuweb2.northumbria.ac.uk/library/skillsplus/loader.html?84> (Accessed: 15 January 2019).



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