

Essential Features of Academic Writing

1. The introduction states the issue – what you are going to talk about – and establishes a context of how it has been perceived by others in your field. Respond to this by showing how you perceive it. This response leads directly to your thesis statement – **what** you are going to prove – and possibly a blueprint of **how** the paper is organized.

Problems: The topic has not been narrowed; the issue is not clearly stated; no clear focus is established; it is not clear what the analysis will focus on nor what the argument is; the beginning of the introduction is far too general, and the thesis appears stuck on (the "funnel" introduction).

Myth: The "funnel" introduction. Start with the issue, not some vague generalization.

2. The thesis, in one sentence, establishes your focus and your viewpoint. It is the insight you have arrived at after having done your analysis and assessed your evidence. Your thesis sentence is clearly structured and makes a claim.

Problems: There is no thesis; a statement of topic is mistaken for a thesis statement; the thesis does not reveal any analysis of the topic but mechanically lists "three main points"; the thesis is too general; the sentence structure is awkward and obscures the argument instead of clarifying it.

Myth: The "three main points" thesis. It lists topics only and does not make an argument.

3. The academic writing task defined in the assignment is engaged and sustained, giving focus and purpose to the paper. Typical writing tasks are to define, classify,

analyze, compare/contrast, argue etc. These academic tasks name the thought processes or higher-order thinking skills you have to demonstrate to get a good mark. They help you explore the topic systematically and generate material for your argument. They also provide an analytical structure to help you advance your thesis and prove your point.

Problems: The paper shows no indication of higher-order thinking skills; there is mainly summary, no analysis; the writing task is only approximated; there is no real line of thought or sense that a thesis is being advanced and argued; the potential of the argument is restricted by the mechanical “five-paragraph essay” formula.

Myth: The “five-paragraph essay.” Imagine the five-paragraph formula applied to a 15-page research paper, and you will know what I mean.

4. The argument is specific and substantial. Key terms are defined; the main point is developed in detail through the use of reasoning and relevant, sufficient evidence; the evidence is subjected to careful analysis; opposing viewpoints are taken into consideration; errors of logical reasoning are avoided.

Problems: There is no argument, only unsupported generalisations; information is transferred from sources but not subjected to reasoned analysis (facts do not speak for themselves); the evidence is not linked clearly to the claim showing its relevance; the thesis has not been broken into sub-arguments and mapped out in a diagram; the argument has not been shaped according to a rhetorical structure; the argument has not been tested; it is too one-sided.

Myth: A series of assertions constitutes an acceptable academic argument. I think not.

5. The organization of the material is clear, the structure logical and coherent. The division of material is balanced and makes analytical sense. The structure clarifies the argument and shapes it in a consistent pattern, emphasizing both thesis and support and anticipating the reading process. Think of **structural coherence** as a road map, and use clear signals to show the reader which direction you

take with your line of thought. These language signals, often called metadiscourse, explain to your readers what you are doing and enable them to follow your line of thought.

Problems: The essay is disorganized and confusing. The thesis is not positioned at the beginning of the essay (it may be in the conclusion); there is no blueprint following the thesis; topic sentences have not been moved up to the beginning of paragraphs; paragraph conclusions do not advance the argument; there are no transitions between paragraphs or within paragraphs; the conclusion does not pull the main points of the argument together for the reader.

Myth: You can write good essays the night before the due date without doing any revision because the reader is happy to labour at finding meaning where you have not had time to supply it.

6. Paragraphs are the text units that show the reader how you develop your analysis and argument in detail. The topic sentence makes a point about a specific aspect of the thesis, a sub-argument. The body of the paragraph introduces and analyses supporting evidence relevant for your argument. Sentences build on each other in the paragraph, and the significance of a statement is always made clear in an elaboration. Generalizations are always supported .

Problems: Paragraphs are too long and on more than one topic, or too short and underdeveloped; topic sentences that connect the paragraph to the thesis statement have not been imposed; paragraphs show no analysis or argument; facts and citations are stated but not analyzed and interpreted ; evidence is not properly integrated; generalizations are made but not supported; there is no conclusion to advance the argument to the next paragraph.

Myth: The “hamburger” paragraph. Facts inserted between a topic sentence and a conclusion do not constitute analysis or argument, merely a transferral of fact. Information must be transformed into knowledge--your knowledge.

7. Citations represent the “voices” of researchers in your field, and you, the writer, should integrate them and respond to them. They have to be represented appropriately in the form of either **quotation, paraphrase or summary** and integrated smoothly into your text. All citations are **documented** correctly in the style preferred in your field.

Problems: There is no lead-in and no interpretation for the citation; quotations are not integrated grammatically in the sentence; quotations are used too often, paraphrase and summary not enough; citations are plagiarised.

Myth: Quotations are the only form of citation available. Paraphrase and summary are often preferred.

8. Words must make sense in the context in which they are used. Precise words are chosen to communicate the full detail and complexity of the topic. The level of formality is consistently appropriate. Usage is correct. Abstract words are used to generalize, concrete ones to illustrate.

Problems: Meaning is absent; word choice is ambiguous; usage is unidiomatic; combination of words is awkward or vague; words and phrases are repeated mechanically; vocabulary is too limited for academic writing.

Myth: Dictionaries are for foreigners. Educated people use dictionaries for precision and to extend their vocabulary.

9. Sentences are correct and varied in both length and structure; correct punctuation clarifies the sentence structure for the reader. Subordination of ideas is used to enhance analysis and argument; co-ordination is used to emphasize ideas of equal value; key words are positioned in emphatic sentence slots at the beginning or the end of the sentence; sentence viruses, the worst grammar errors mentioned below, are avoided.

Problems: Sentence viruses that “kill” coherence are sentence fragments; comma splice or run-on sentences; pronoun reference and pronoun agreement problems;

subject-verb agreement errors; inconsistent shifts in verb tense; dangling modifiers and misplaced modifiers.

Myth: Grammar errors are unimportant. In the reader's mind, sloppy writing equals sloppy thinking. 10. Spelling, mechanics, and grammar are always correct in academic writing .

Myth: You can rely mechanically on the computer's spell check and grammar check. In your dreams. Computerized advice on writing is limited by the user's ability to apply it intelligently.

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