6 ▶ FEATURES OF ACADEMIC WRITING

By joining a course in higher education you have become a member of an academic community. Therefore, when you write academic texts, you are expected to communicate with other members of that community in an acceptable manner. This chapter aims to help you unlock the mystery of academic writing by providing you with guidelines and practical activities.

This chapter will cover:

- the style conventions of an academic text
- developing paragraphs and turning them into organised and cohesive text
- writing plans
- writing drafts.

USING THIS CHAPTER

INTRODUCTION

In academic writing you are expected to produce logically-structured ideas with well-argued, substantiated points, taking different opinions into consideration. There are various genres of academic writing, such as essays, reports, lab reports, case studies and dissertations. Regardless of the genre you are writing in, your style of writing should be the same – clear, concise, with appropriately referenced ideas. In higher education one of the main things you will be judged on is the quality of your writing. This chapter considers the various elements required in an academic text from word through to paragraph level. It offers advice on text cohesion and emphasises the need for planning and drafting work.

ACADEMIC STYLE

If you are not sure about the difference between formal and informal language, try reading widely and critically. Read a popular newspaper article and a friend's letter or email, and then read a page of a book or a journal from your recommended reading list. You will soon begin to see there is a difference in the style of these texts.

Activity 6.1 Identifying formality

Below are three excerpts.

(a) Can you identify the context each one may be found in?
(b) Can you recognise the differences between them?

Excerpt 1

A clear problem in academic writing is that of the assessor or 'assignment setter', as described by Ivanic and Simpson (1992:146). 'This person is posing a challenge and a threat to the student, and positioning him as a writer, and exercising control over him. However stimulating the assignment may be . . . it is also face-threatening because it will be judged.' Students' knowledge that the work they have written will be assessed may oblige them to consider their writing from different perspectives, namely what *they* deem acceptable and what their *tutors* deem acceptable. This is often difficult for students to achieve.

Excerpt 2

?4U. Who 8 my pizza? CYAL8R. <3

(Retrieved 25 June 2008 from http://www.webopedia.com/quick_ref/textmessageabbreviations.asp)

Excerpt 3

I don't think there is a case for this argument at all. How could anyone imagine putting such a proposal forward when it's so clearly ludicrous? I believe that the more people are aware of this issue, the better off we would all be.

Activity 6.2 Identifying formal and informal features

1 Find examples of the following features in the excerpts on the preceding page and write them in the appropriate column. (Some squares will remain blank.)

	Excerpt 1 is a formal text	Excerpts 2 and 3 are informal texts
Formal vocabulary		
Passive voice		
Cautious language		
Objective language		
Subjective language		
Emotive language		
Use of questions		
Contracted forms		
References		

2 Now look at the content of each column. What differences and similarities do you notice between the features found in each excerpt?

Each of these features of academic writing will now be looked at in more detail. (References are dealt with in Chapter 10.)

Formal vocabulary

Academic writing uses more formal vocabulary than spoken language. Students often feel that it is difficult to distinguish between formal and less formal language. The following written sentence would be perfectly acceptable for instance:

He tried to show that it was possible to lose weight and eat his favourite food.

Consider the same sentence written more formally:

He attempted to prove that losing weight whilst eating his favourite meals was achievable.

The second example somehow seems more authoritative and is better placed in the academic world rather than in a magazine.

The reason for using formal expressions is not because academic language is pompous, but because it is clearer. Consider the following example:

Roberts (2007) says that lower house prices do not affect you if you are not planning to sell your property.

The use of 'says' seems clear enough but it is not *specific* enough. Does Roberts *think* that is the case, or is he *certain*? Can we tell what his attitude to lower house prices is? Consider how the meaning of the sentence is affected if *says* is replaced by *suggests*, or *stresses*, or even *claims*.

Roberts (2007) claims that lower house prices do not affect homeowners if they are not planning to sell their property.

➡️ **See Chapter 11**

The implication with this example is that the reader cannot be sure whether to believe Roberts or not. This nuance in meaning is not there when the word *says* instead of *claims* is used.

Activity 6.3 From informal to formal

Find more formal words or phrases to replace those underlined below:

1 Research <u>shows</u> . . .   _____

2 Three problems have been <u>found</u>.   _____

3 The changes he made were <u>bad</u>.   _____

4 <u>Lots of</u> people think . . .   _____

5 There were many <u>reasons</u> for this.   _____

6 Scientists have <u>tried</u> to prove . . .   _____

7 £100,000 was <u>given</u> to charity.   _____

8 He discussed issues <u>like</u> famine and poverty. _____

9 She <u>has got to </u>find alternatives.   _____

10 We do not have <u>enough</u> resources.   _____

Multi-word verbs

Multi-word verbs such as 'look up (an entry in an encyclopaedia)' or 'go out of (a building)' are often used in spoken English but are considered too informal for academic writing. Multi-word verbs always have a more formal equivalent; in this case 'consult' and 'leave'.

You need to choose your words carefully to make your meaning as clear as possible. In order to help you find appropriate alternatives, we recommend that you frequently consult a thesaurus.

Activity 6.4 Finding synonyms

Find suitable synonyms to replace the underlined multi-word verbs below:

1   There are many issues to <u>think about</u>.   _____

2   They <u>carried out</u> an investigation.   _____

3   The situation <u>got worse</u>.   _____

4   The research tried to <u>find out</u> these causes.   _____

5   Many areas were <u>looked into</u>.   _____

6   Interest rates are <u>going up</u>.   _____

7   This has been <u>going on</u> for a while.   _____

8   The information is <u>broken down</u> into sections.   _____

9   He managed to <u>get by</u> on very little food.   _____

10 Five candidates <u>showed up at</u> the interview.   _____

Use of the passive voice

In your academic studies you will often come across the passive voice, for example:

The report was written. (passive: use of 'be' + past participle)

In spoken English a subject such as 'people', 'somebody', 'they', 'we' or 'you' is often used when it is not clear who the person doing the action is. For example, 'they forecast rain for today'. In academic writing, the passive is often preferred: 'rain was forecast for today'.

Compare:

We interviewed 65 students. (active)

with

65 students were interviewed. (passive)

It is not merely a question of changing your active sentences into passive ones. You will need to consider a number of factors as illustrated below.

If you are a literature student writing about Jane Austen's characterisation in *Pride and Prejudice* you may find that the person you are describing must be stated for the meaning to be clear. Consider:

Mrs Bennet was looking for a potential suitor for Elizabeth.

as opposed to:

A potential suitor for Elizabeth was being sought.

The second example, which uses the passive, is in this case unclear, as the person doing the seeking is not stated. It would therefore be more appropriate to specify the person rather than use the passive in this case.

If, on the other hand, you are a history student writing about the mummification process, you are more likely to write:

The body of the dead king was wrapped in linen.

as opposed to:

People wrapped the body of the dead king in linen.

In this case, the second example does not provide the reader with further information by adding the word 'people'. The first example using the passive is more appropriate.

When you are writing you will therefore need to decide whether the action or the result is more important than the person carrying it out. Ask questions such as *Who are "they"?*, and *Are "they" more important in that sentence than the act?* If yes, you may choose to state them using the active voice. If no, you may omit them using the passive voice.

Activity 6.5 Writing passive sentences

Rewrite the underlined parts of these sentences. Instead of using 'we', 'the researchers', or 'they', write a passive sentence with an appropriate verb form.

Example: We can solve the problem. *The problem can be solved.*

(a) Prices are stable and we have maintained them in this way over generations.

(b) We define tropical forests here as 'evergreen or partly evergreen forests'.

(c) We will confine the discussion to general principles of treatment.

(d) The researchers transcribed many genes and synthesised many proteins.

(e) They replicated these findings.

(a) _____

(b) _____

(c) _____

(d) _____

(e) _____

A further way of avoiding the use of 'they' or 'people' is by introducing the sentence with the impersonal 'it' leading to expressions such as 'it is felt that…' or 'it is thought that…'. Consider the following examples:

It is felt that the police are doing valuable work.

It was thought that the government had shown little regard for public opinion.

The alternative would have been:

People feel that the police are doing valuable work.

Which people? Are they important?

Everyone thought that the government had shown little regard for public opinion.

Who is 'everyone' exactly? Is this word needed for the meaning of the sentence to be clear?

In many cases a different construction is also possible such as 'X is felt to . . .' or 'X is thought to . . .'. For example:

The police are felt to be doing valuable work.

The government was thought to have shown little regard for public opinion.

The table below indicates some choices to help you construct passive sentences. (Please note that not all combinations are possible.)

It	is was has/have been may be/could be	felt thought believed claimed	that

Or:

X (the government, the representatives, the producers)	is/are was/were has/have been may be/could be	felt thought believed claimed	to be . . . to have done . . .

Whichever construction you use make sure your meaning is clear.

Activity 6.6 **Constructing passive sentences**

Rewrite the following sentences using any of the passive sentence constructions outlined earlier:

1 People consider that this surgeon is a brilliant practitioner.
2 Somebody claims that the drug produced no undesirable side effects.
3 Most people now think that only a small fraction of the nitrous oxide emitted to the atmosphere each year comes from fossil fuel use, primarily coal.
4 Researchers believe that the only problem with daytime sleep is that it is too short.
5 Although the government expects the patient to pay for his treatment, he will be reimbursed via the state medical insurance scheme.

1 _____

2 _____

3 _____

4 _____

5 _____

Cautious language

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 claims you are making. It is unlikely that the evidence you present will be conclusive enough for you to state that something will definitely happen. At the same time, you need to be careful about making sweeping statements which do not consider exceptions. This is why academic writing often calls for a cautious style. There are various ways in which caution can be expressed. This includes using appropriate modal verbs, adverbs, adjectives and other lexical items. Caution will be addressed in more detail in Chapter 11.

Objective versus subjective language

Written academic 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 you want to give and the arguments you want to make, rather than you. People reading your work want to know what you have studied and learned and how this has led you to your various conclusions. The thoughts and beliefs you express should be based on your lectures, reading, discussions and research, and it is important to make this clear in your writing. Compare the following two paragraphs. Which paragraph is the most objective?

> ### Paragraph 1
>
> Marketers may sometimes face dilemmas when seeking to balance consumer needs and social responsibility. For example, no amount of test results can guarantee product safety in cars if consumers value speed and power more than safety features. Buyers may choose a less expensive chain-saw without a safety guard, although society or a government regulatory agency might deem it irresponsible and unethical for the manufacturer to sell it.
>
> ### Paragraph 2
>
> Marketers have a responsibility to society and they often don't know how to balance that with what customers might need. Why should someone care about the safety features of a car for example, if they like speed and power more? And even though society or the government should not allow shops to sell chain-saws without safety guards, what about if I want a cheaper product which doesn't include the guards?
>
> <div align="right">(Kotler et al., 2008: 77)</div>

Generally, in order to write objectively you need to avoid using words like 'I', 'me', and 'you'. If you do not reference an idea, the reader will assume it is yours, so you do not need to make this more explicit by adding 'I think'. It would be more appropriate to use impersonal language such as:

- it is worthwhile to consider . . .
- the data indicates that . . .
- more concrete evidence is needed before . . .
- several possibilities emerge . . .

Activity 6.7 Subjective language

Underline all the examples of subjective language in the following paragraph.

> Everybody knows about the threat of global warming to our earth. We all pollute the atmosphere with gases and we all throw away rubbish that could be recycled. As far as I am concerned, these are two aspects that can be improved. I believe that everyone should use more public transport and leave their car at home. I also think that we can all learn to recycle more of our plastic and glass bottles. Even our left-over food can be used as compost.

Activity 6.8 Objective style

Rewrite the paragraph in Activity 6.7 using a more objective and more formal style.

Emotive language

It follows that using a more objective style in your writing makes the text impersonal. There is therefore little room for emotive language which shows your personal attitude such as unfortunately, luckily, surprisingly, thankfully and other adverbs, unless you are writing reflectively.

Use of questions

Some student writers use questions to introduce the point they wish to make next.

> **Increasing numbers of students are choosing Business Studies as their university subject. What is the reason for this? Many students believe . . .**

You will often find this style in non-academic articles on the Internet though you may also find examples in your coursebooks. Whereas for students this would be an acceptable style for oral presentations, questions should not be used in academic writing. The above example could be rewritten in the following way:

> **Increasing numbers of students are choosing Business Studies as their university subject. The reason for this is that many students believe . . .**

Activity 6.9 **Substituting questions**

Remove the questions from the following paragraphs and make any necessary adjustments to the texts.

1 What is the symbolic importance of the jury? Jury trial represents judgment by one's peers. The jury is therefore seen as a major control over abuse of state power. **(Elliott and Quinn, 2008: 224)**
2 Suctioning is associated with several complications. What can be done to minimise or decrease these complications? There are several techniques which can be used, such as hyperinflation and hyperoxygenation. **(Kozier *et al*., 2008: 403)**
3 What is the overall variation of the impedance? As can be seen, for frequency f_1, the inductive reactance AB and the capacitive reactance AC are equal in magnitude so that the resultant reactance is zero. Consequently, the impedance is then only the resistance AD of the circuit. **(Hughes, 2008: 300)**
4 What is the financial objective of a business? A business is normally set up with a view to increasing the wealth of its owners. **(McLaney and Atrill, 2008: 25)**

Contracted forms

Contracted words such as 'don't', 'can't', 'shouldn't' are informal and should not normally be used when writing in an academic context (unless they are quotations which cannot be changed).