

This guide examines the features of academic writing and provides some advice on how you can develop your ability to write clearly and authoritatively.

What distinguishes academic writing from other forms of writing?

Academic writing is distinguished principally by the audience for whom it is written. Whereas a piece of reflective writing, for example, is written for yourself or for a personal development diary, academic writing, which is usually written for assessment purposes or for publication, is written for an *informed* audience. As such, even if it is a formative piece of work, it represents an attempt to engage in the academic discourse written about a specific topic. It therefore needs to display certain features that are the hallmarks of scholarly work. These may be summarised as follows:

Objectivity

Whereas reflective writing, for example, is subjective because it is written in the first person (i.e. 'I think that . . .'), academic writing should be objective and therefore needs to be written in the third person (i.e. 'it is thought that . . .'). This is more about style rather than substance, but adopting a more objective approach suggests that your thoughts are more considered and that you have thought more deeply about the issue.

Criticality

Academic writing exhibits criticality. In other words, in academic writing, you are doing something more than just describing a topic or imparting information; you are using that information by analysing it in relation to a question, weighing it up against other information, evaluating its importance or validity, and integrating it into your own argument. This is not easy to do, but if you find yourself simply reciting facts you have noted down during the course of your reading, stop, and consider how each piece of information is related to the question you are answering.

Formal English

Academic writing is written using formal English. Formal English does not include colloquial words or phrases; in other words, it is not necessarily English as it is spoken.

For example, it is inappropriate to include phrases such as 'It was dead good', inappropriate contractions like 'isn't (= is not)' or 'wouldn't (= would not)', or profanity ('it was crap'). Formal English is also grammatically sound and contains accurate spelling throughout. Just as injecting your writing with criticality can be challenging, ironing out grammatical problems from your writing is also not always easy. There is no quick fix, but with conscious effort, perseverance, and plenty of practice, it can be improved.

Clear focus

Effective academic writing is also characterised by being sharply focused on the question. This is a hallmark of all good writing, but it is particularly important in academic writing because it is more purposive than discursive. In other words, it is written for a specific purpose rather than just simply to entertain.

Effective structure

Academic writing not only has a clear focus; it is also structured effectively. The content of a piece of academic writing is well-organised and accessible; the argument should progress logically and its constituent elements should be clearly apparent. An effective structure can be determined at the planning stage.

Developing your academic writing

1. Practice

The quality of your academic writing will improve naturally as you progress through your degree – as long as you consciously engage in its development. Review your work regularly in light of the information provided here; ask your tutors how you might improve your writing.

2. Reading

Your ability to produce effective academic writing will also improve as you read more scholarly work. Read as many journal articles and recommended books as you can and look at the way the authors are writing. In this way, you will slowly take on board the principle features of academic writing.

For more information, visit our Moodle site.

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