ETW Module B

Study Material:

Source: library.leeds.ac.uk . Here is the link to the website- https://library.leeds.ac.uk/info/14011/writing/106/academic_writing

ACADEMIC WRITING

What is academic writing?

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Academic writing is clear, concise, focussed, structured and backed up by evidence. Its purpose is to aid the reader's understanding.

It has a formal tone and style, but it is not complex and does not require the use of long sentences and complicated vocabulary.

Each subject discipline will have certain writing conventions, vocabulary and types of discourse that you will become familiar with over the course of your degree. However, there are some general characteristics of academic writing that are relevant across all disciplines.

Characteristics of academic writing

Academic writing is:

Planned and focused: answers the question and demonstrates an understanding of the subject.

Structured: is coherent, written in a logical order, and brings together related points and material.

Evidenced: demonstrates knowledge of the subject area, supports opinions and arguments with evidence, and is referenced accurately.

Formal in tone and style: uses appropriate language and tenses, and is clear, concise and balanced.

The following pages will look at all these characteristics in detail.

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Define your purpose and reader

The first step to writing academically is to clearly define the purpose of the writing and the audience.

Most formal academic writing at university is set by, and written for, an academic tutor or assessor, and there should be clear criteria against which they will mark your work.

You will need to spend some time interpreting your question and deciding how to tackle your assignment.

If you are writing for yourself – for example making notes to record or make sense of something – then you can set your own criteria such as clarity, brevity, and relevance. See our Note making pages for further help.

Once you have a clear idea of what is required for your assignment, you can start planning your research and gathering evidence. See our Planning your assignment pages for advice on breaking down the different steps in this process.

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Structure your work

Once you have a plan for your writing, you can use this plan to create the structure of your writing. Structured writing has a beginning, middle and an end, and uses focussed paragraphs to develop the argument.

Create the overall structure

Some academic writing, such as lab or business reports, will have a fairly rigid structure, with headings and content for each section. For more details see our Report writing pages.

In other formats, writing usually follows the same overall structure: introduction, main body and conclusion.

The introduction outlines the main direction the writing will take, and gives any necessary background information and context.

In the main body each point is presented, explored and developed. These points must be set out in a logical order, to make it easier for the reader to follow and understand.

The conclusion brings together the main points, and will highlight the key message or argument you want the reader to take away. It may also identify any gaps or weaknesses in the arguments or ideas presented, and recommend further research or investigation where appropriate.

Arrange your points in a logical order

When you start writing you should have a clear idea of what you want to say. Create a list of your main points and think about what the reader needs to know and in what order they will need to know it. To select the main points you want to include, ask yourself whether each point you have considered really contributes to answering the question. Is the point relevant to your overall argument?

Select appropriate evidence that you will use to support each main point. Think carefully about which evidence to use, you must evaluate that information as not everything you find will be of high quality.

See our searching for information page for advice on how to find high quality, academic information.

Grouping your points may help you create a logical order. These groups will broadly fit into an overall pattern, such as for and against, thematic, chronological or by different schools of thought or approach.

You can then put these groups into a sequence that the reader can follow and use to make sense of the topic or argument. It may be helpful to talk through your argument with someone.

It may be helpful to arrange ideas initially in the form of a mind-map, which allows you to develop key points with supporting information branching off.

MindView software (available on most university computers) allows you to create an essay structure where you can add in pictures, files and attachments – perfect for organising evidence to support your point.

Write in structured paragraphs

Use paragraphs to build and structure your argument, and separate each of your points into a different paragraph.

Make your point clear in the first or second sentence of the paragraph to help the reader to follow the line of reasoning.

The rest of the paragraph should explain the point in greater detail, and provide relevant evidence and examples where necessary or useful. Your interpretation of this evidence will help to substantiate your thinking and can lend weight to your argument.

At the end of the paragraph you should show how the point you have made is significant to the overall argument or link to the next paragraph.

See constructing focused paragraphs for an example.

Use signalling words when writing

Using signalling words will help the reader to understand the structure of your work and where you might be taking your argument.

Use signalling words to:

- Add more information eg furthermore, moreover, additionally
- Compare two similar points eg similarly, in comparison
- Show contrasting viewpoints eg however, in contrast, yet
- Show effect or conclusion eg therefore, consequently, as a result
- Emphasise eg significantly, particularly
- Reflect sequence eg first, second, finally.

(Adapted from Signal words from Clark College, Vancouver)

The Manchester Academic Phrasebank at has more examples of signalling words to use in your work.

Words like these help make the structure of your writing more effective and can clarify the flow and logic of your argument.

Here are some examples in practice:

“Using a laboratory method was beneficial as a causal relationship could be established between cognitive load and generating attributes. However, this method creates an artificial setting which reduces the study’s ecological validity.”

In this example the use of the word however at the beginning of the second sentence indicates that a contrasting point of view is about to be made. It also suggests that the writer may have more sympathy with the second opinion.

"Firstly, the concepts and person centred care will be defined…. Next, communication will be discussed… Finally, the relationship between loss and communication will be examined." [Taken from a Healthcare essay]

In this example the writer has used signalling words to demonstrate the sequence of their argument by using Firstly, next, finally making the structure of the essay very clear.

"Employee satisfaction is justifiable to employees because it causes an improvement on their well being (Grandley, 2003). Moreover, employees that are in a good mood at work are less likely to act because their true feelings are in accordance with the needed display of emotions (Grandley, 2003)." [Taken from a Business School essay]

The use of the word moreover tells the reader that the next sentence will provide further evidence or information to support the statement made in the first sentence. It also suggest that the writer strongly agrees with the first statement.

Revise, edit and proofread your work

Most writing will require several drafts and revisions in order to improve the clarity and structure. It is rare that a writer will make the very best decisions in the first draft. See our editing and proofreading pages for more details.

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How to incorporate evidence

Academic writing must be supported by evidence such as data, facts, quotations, arguments, statistics, research, and theories.

This evidence will:

Add substance to your own ideas

- Allow the reader to see what has informed your thinking and how your ideas fit in with, and differ from, others' in your field

- Demonstrate your understanding of the general concepts and theories on the topic
- Show you have researched widely, and know about specialist/niche areas of interest.

There are several methods that you can use to incorporate other people's work into your own written work. These are:

- Paraphrasing
- Summarising
- Synthesising
- Quoting.

You are likely to use a combination of these throughout your writing, depending on the purpose that you are trying to achieve.

The main characteristics of the different methods you can use to incorporate others' work into your own writing are shown in our comparison table (PDF).

Be aware that your writing should not just be a patchwork of other people's ideas made up of quotes, paraphrases and summaries of other people's work.

You need to show how the information you found has helped you to develop your own arguments, ideas and opinions. See Critical thinking pages for advice about writing critically.

Organising your evidence can be an overwhelming task – especially when you need to manage many different sources. As well as EndNote, you may find online tools such as Citavi and Zotero particularly helpful to save data sources, highlight key quotes, and cite them in your work.

How to paraphrase others' work:

Paraphrasing is using your own words to express someone else's ideas. When paraphrasing, make sure that you:

- Identify a relevant theme or point, depending on your purpose
- Write the point in your own words
- Focus on the meaning of an idea or argument
- Include a reference to the original author.

Common pitfalls include:

Describing an author's idea/argument but not explaining the significance to your own argument, or the point that you are trying to make

- Using too many of the original author's words, this includes using the same structure
- Not distinguishing between the author's point and your own viewpoint
- Providing too much detail.

For further advice and examples of paraphrasing, see this tutorial from RMIT university.

See more examples of successful and unsuccessful paraphrases.

How to summarise others' work

Summarising is providing a condensed version of someone else's key points. When summarising other people's work, make sure that you:

Identify the relevant points of the idea or argument,depending on your purpose

Write a shortened version, in your own words, to show your understanding

Include an in-text citation and reference to the original author.

Common pitfalls include:

Describing an author's idea/argument but not explaining the significance to your own argument or point you are trying to make

Providing too much detail such as examples, anecdotes, unnecessary background information rather than being selective and applying the information to the question you are trying to answer.

For further advice and examples of summarising, see this tutorial from RMIT university.

How to synthesise others' work

Synthesising involves combining different information and ideas to develop your own argument. When synthesising others' work, make sure that you:

Group sources into relevant categories, for example, authors with similar viewpoints or research that reveals the same results

Write about these in your own words. Do not discuss each author separately; you must identify the overall points you want to make

Include references to all the original authors.

Common pitfalls include:

Not distinguishing clearly which viewpoint/s belong to which author/s

Listing authors separately or one by one, thus not grouping relevant authors or points together

Giving too much detail about different perspectives rather than being selective of the key features relevant to your line of argument

Describing the idea/argument but not explaining the significance to your own argument or point you are trying to make.

For further advice and examples of synthesis, see this tutorial on synthesising from RMIT University.

View our advice about referencing.

How to quote from others' work:

Quoting is where you copy an author's text word for word, place quotation marks around the words and add a citation at the end of the quote. When quoting others' work, make sure that you:

Copy the quote exactly from the original, as the author has written it, taking care to include quotation marks

Show where you have made any changes to the text (see citing quotations using Harvard and citing quotations using Numeric for more guidance on this)

Include an in-text citation and reference to the original author.

Common pitfalls include:

Using too many quotes throughout your work

Incorporating a quote without explaining the significance to your own argument or point you are trying to make.

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Use clear and concise language

Academic writing is concise, clear, formal and active. It does not need to be complex or use long sentences and obscure vocabulary.

Be concise

In formal academic writing it is important to be concise. This helps your reader to understand the points you are making.

Here are some tips to help you:

Only include one main idea per sentence.

Keep your sentences to a reasonable length (generally not more than 25 words). Long sentences can be difficult to follow and this may distract from your point.

Avoid repetition.

Avoid using redundant words. For example:

Use “because” instead of “due to the fact that”.

Use “alternatives” instead of “alternative choices”.

Use “fundamentals” and not “basic fundamentals”.

Use “concisely” instead of “in as few words as possible”.

Reading your work aloud may help you to identify any repetition or redundant words.

Use formal language

In academic writing you are expected to use formal language.:

Avoid using colloquialisms or slang terms such as ‘sort of’ or ‘basically’. Instead you could use ‘somewhat’ or ‘fundamentally’.

Write words out in full rather than shortening them. For example, instead of writing “don’t” or “isn’t” you would be expected to write “do not” or “is not”

The use of clichés is not appropriate in academic writing. These are phrases such as “at the end of the day” or “in the nick of time.” Instead of this you might write finally or at the critical moment.

Use a blend of active and passive verbs

Most verbs can be used in either an active or passive form. It is usually appropriate to use a mixture of passive and active forms within academic writing. Always check with your department to see what form of writing would be most appropriate for your subject area.

The active voice places the subject of the sentence in charge of the action.

For example: “The research assistant designed the survey.” Here the research assistant (the subject) designed (the verb) the survey (the object).

It is usually more direct and easier to read than the passive voice.

However, sometimes you may want to emphasise what is happening rather than who is doing it. To do this you can use the passive voice.

The passive voice places the subject at the end, or may leave it out completely.

For example: “The survey was designed by the research assistant.” Here the survey (the object) was designed (the verb) by the research assistant (the subject).

The passive voice is more formal than the active voice. It is often used in academic writing as it is seen as more impersonal and therefore more objective. However, it is not always easy to read and it may add unnecessary words.

Adapted from Writing with Style by Stott and Avery, 2001, p.54.

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There is rarely one answer to a question or assignment. Research, ideas and arguments should always be open to being challenged, so it is important that the language you use acknowledges this. In your academic work, you should not present something as a fact that might not be.

In academic writing, you can use language to show how confident you are about an argument or claim you are discussing. The common ways to do this are often referred to as hedges or boosters. You can also use different reporting verbs to convey your feelings or attitude towards a topic

Hedges

When writing, be careful of using words such as “definitely” or “proves”. Ask yourself whether your statement is a fact or whether there may be some doubt either now or in the future.

Some useful hedging words and phrases to use in your work are:

“This suggests…”

“It is possible that…”

“A possible explanation…”

“Usually…”

“Sometimes…”

“Somewhat…”

Read the following two sentences:

“Research proves that drinking a large volume of fizzy drinks containing sugar leads to the development of type II diabetes.”

“Research suggests that high consumption of fizzy drinks containing sugar may contribute to the development of type II diabetes.”

In sentence 1, the statement is presented as proven fact: that a high volume of sugary fizzy drinks will definitely lead to type II diabetes. This leaves no room for doubt or criticism or the fact that some people may drink large volumes of fizzy drinks and never develop type II diabetes.

In sentence 2, the writer has used ‘hedging language’ – ‘suggests’ and ‘may contribute’ – to show that while there is evidence to link sugary drinks and type II diabetes, this may not be true for every person and may be proven to be incorrect in the future.

Other examples of hedging phrases are:

In what appears to be the first formalised study on caregiver burden…

If students experience a positive, helpful attitude from the librarians they encounter, it may help them to adopt a positive perception of academic librarians in general.

He claims that luck is a major factor in whether people are successful in all aspects of their lives.

Boosters

You might want to express a measure of certainty or conviction in your writing and this is when "booster" language can help.

Some useful booster words and phrases to use in your work are:

"Clearly" (only use if you are certain it is clear)

"There is a strong correlation…"

"Results indicate…"

Take the same sentence as used in the previous section:

"Research suggests that high consumption of fizzy drinks containing sugar may contribute to the development of type II diabetes."

"Research indicates a clear link between the high consumption of a large volume of fizzy drinks containing sugar and the development of type II diabetes."

In sentence 1, the writer has used the hedging language 'suggested' and 'may contribute', to show that while there is evidence to link sugary drinks and type II diabetes this may not be true for every person and may be proven to be incorrect in the future.

In sentence 2, the writer still uses language to allow for doubt and argument but it is clear that this writer is more convinced by the research.

The Manchester Academic Phrasebank provides many more examples that you can use in your written work.

Reporting verbs

Reporting verbs can be grouped into the three main categories of strong, neutral and tentative:

Strong verbs convey a degree of certainty about an issue.

Neutral verbs do not indicate any value judgements on the part of the author. They are rather descriptive in tone.

Tentative verbs show that the writer tends to feel a certain way about an issue but is not wholly sure.

Below are common examples of strong, neutral and tentative reporting verbs.

This table compares the three types of reporting verb: strong, neutral and tentative, by listing examples of each.

Strong

argue

Assert

Challenge

Contend

Counter the view that

Deny

Emphasise

Maintain

Negate

Theorize

Refute

Reject

Strongly believe that

Support the view that

Neutral

assume

Demonstrate

Describe

Examine

Illustrate

Indicate

Mention

Note

Observe

Point out

Report

Reveal

Show

State

study

Tentative

claim

Hypothesise

Imply

Intimate

Moot

Posit the view that

Postulate

Propose

Question the view that

Recommend

Speculate

Suggest

It is important to use the correct tense and voice in your written work. You will probably need to use different tenses throughout depending upon the context.

Only use first person voice in reflective writing

Academic arguments are not usually presented in the first person (using I), but use more objective language, logic and reasoning to persuade (rather than emotional or personal perspectives).

This may not apply, however, if you are asked to write a reflective report based on your own thoughts and experiences.

Use past tense to speak about your method

If you are writing about an experiment you carried out or a method you used then use the past tense. For example: “Our experiment showed wide variations in results where the variable was altered even slightly.”

Use present tense to conclude or discuss established knowledge

If you are writing about established knowledge then use the present tense. For example: “Diabetes is a condition where the amount of glucose in the blood is too high because the body cannot use it properly.” (Diabetes UK, 2015)

When you are reporting on the findings or research of others then you should use the present tense. For example, you might write: “Smith’s research from 2012 finds that regular exercise may contribute to good cardiovascular health.”

When you are writing about your conclusions or what you have found then use the present tense. For example: “In this case there is not a large difference between the two diameter values (from Feret’s diameter and calculated equation), which again is probably due to the fact that the average circularity ratio is on the high end of the scale, 0.88, and therefore infers near circular pores.”

If you are writing about figures that you have presented in a table or chart then use the present tense. For example: “These figures show that the number of birds visiting the hide increase every year in May…”

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Build your argument

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The most important voice to get across in your writing is your own; it is how you can show the reader (usually your tutor) what you are thinking, what your views are and how you have engaged critically with the topic being discussed. You can do this by building an effective and persuasive argument for your reader.

Make an argument

Your argument is how you express your viewpoint and answer the question you have been set, using evidence.

Your argument can help you plan the structure of your work and guide you to find the evidence you need to support it.

Make sure that your argument runs throughout your writing and that everything you include is relevant to it. Try to sum up your argument in a few words before you start writing and keep checking that it remains the focus as you research and write your work.

Structure your argument

Guide your reader through your argument in a logical way. Think about what questions your reader might have. If you can answer these questions through your argument, it will seem more convincing.

Present both sides of the debate, along with your thoughts, linking together the different elements.

You can then work towards a conclusion by weighing the evidence and showing how certain ideas are accepted and others are rejected. Your conclusion should make clear where you stand.

Develop your argument

Develop your argument by considering the evidence and drawing your own conclusion.

If you are considering a range of opinions, try to group them together under different headings.

Look at the strengths and weaknesses of the different sets of evidence and present these clearly and in a critical way. This will help to show you understand what you have read.

Take the evidence into account in developing your own argument and make clear what your viewpoint is. Perhaps your argument has strengths and weaknesses as well – it is fine to acknowledge these.

Include your own voice in your writing

Your voice will emerge through your discussion, interpretation, and evaluation of the sources.

Here are some ways you can establish your voice in your writing:

Make your unattributed (not referenced) assertion at the start of paragraphs followed by evidence, findings, arguments from your sources.

Example:

"To date there is no well-established tool to measure divided attention in children. Current methods used to assess divided attention usually involve a variation of the CPT with an additional task included e.g. counting or listening to auditory stimuli (Salthouse, 2003)."

Explicitly tell your reader what the connections are between sources.

Example:

"Smith (2009), however takes a different approach…"

Explicitly tell your reader what the connections are between those sources and your main assertion.

Example:

"Netzer's argument challenges the term 'renaissance', as it displays repeatedly the use of classical imagery during the medieval period, therefore illustrating that canonising a chronological period can be disadvantageous as characteristics of the term."

Use language to show your strong agreement/disagreement/cautious agreement with sources.

Example:

"Smith's (2009) findings show a clear…A serious weakness with this argument is…The research suggests…"

Include "so what" summary sentences (evaluative sentences) at the end of paragraphs.

Example:

"This shows that it is detrimental to strictly categorise chronological periods with artistic genres, as many art historians suggest different movements were taking place in separate geographical locations at the same time."

Using different verbs in your writing will show your understanding of the sources, for example:

"Stevenson (2015) explains that…"

"Stevenson (2015) argues…"

"Stevenson (2015) describes how…"

You can also use verbs to show your agreement or disagreement with other author's arguments. For example:

"Stevenson (2015) correctly identifies…"

"Stevenson (2015) fails to consider…"

"Stevenson (2015) reveals… "

The Manchester Academic Phrasebank provides many more examples that you can use in your written work.