Academic Writing

This section will cover:

1. What is an ‘academic style’?

The aim of academic writing is to present “the truth” in a manner that is clear, accurate and objective. To that end there is a certain style of writing which aids in the considered presentation of evidence.

The best way to see this in action is to read published academic work. There is no one single style, but there are certain ‘rules’ which distinguish an academic paper from other forms of writing such as that used in journalism, producing reports, or writing novels. Essentially it is about distinguishing fact from opinion and using evidence to support all assertions.

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2. First, second or third person?

Academic writing is most frequently written as an impersonal account.

Take a look at the following 3 fictitious examples and consider which of them is the most appropriate form to use.

First person

I was sitting at my desk as I considered the problem of infection control in this hospital. It occurred to me that it was a problem with hand washing. In my experience, doctors never wash their hands.

Second person

You should consider the huge problem of infection control. If you wash your hands more often then the problem will go away.

Third person

Smith (2000) found that hospital-based infections were increasing at a rate of 6% a year. Research by Davies and Llewellyn (2001) suggested that at least 31% of hospital acquired infections were attributable to poor hand washing technique amongst clinicians. This infers that improving hand washing technique would reduce the incidence of infections.

Hopefully you can see that the third person example better conveys the objective issues and arrives at a considered conclusion on the basis of the evidence. It is generally better to use the **third person impersonal** for the majority of academic work. The phrase "I think…" or "in my opinion…." is very rarely desirable in an academic paper. Where you are drawing inferences from the evidence – still use an impersonal form – as in the 3rd example above.

There will be occasions when you need to describe something you did, or a place you worked etc. In such instances it is perfectly acceptable to use the 1st person (I) and alternatives such as "the author" or "the researcher" or "one" may appear inappropriate or even pompous!
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3. Past, present, active or passive?

Academic writing tends to be written mainly in the past tense and uses the passive voice, as in this example …

Smith (2000) found that hospital-based infections were increasing at a rate of 6% a year. Research by Davies and Llewellyn (2001) suggested that at least 31% of hospital acquired infections were attributable to poor hand washing technique amongst clinicians. This infers that improving hand washing technique would reduce the incidence of infections.

You may note that the inference drawn in the last sentence is in the present tense. This is acceptable in such instances.

There are exceptions to this. If writing a research proposal, for example, you will be discussing a research project that you are *planning* to undertake, so this will be written in the future tense. For example…

The research will be based on survey methodology and the main data collection tool will be questionnaires. The sample will be derived from a stratified random process.

In all of these examples you may note that the passive voice is used. It is very rare to use the active voice (see section 2).

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4. Objective writing

Use objective language as opposed to subjective. For example , use….

The questionnaire was sent to 30 members of staff in hospital X.	√
And not…. The questionnaire was difficult to design but was used anyway and sent to all my colleagues in the hospital that I knew so well.	X

Clichés are a very common stylistic trap. They occur frequently in everyday spoken English but have no part in academic work. They tend to represent a subjective shortcut and their meaning is often lost in history or is part of 'street language' and meanings often change (such as 'wicked'!)

Consider this example..

"Swansea Uni is a right-on place to be. The beaches are wicked and the night life is really happening. The lecturers are all dudes and the music in the Union is banging!"

Roughly translated –

"Swansea University is a popular place to study. Its central location makes for easy access to a busy nightlife and excellent beaches. The lecturing staff are well-respected and the lively Student's Union attracts famous contemporary artists."

If you cannot see the humour in the advice "avoid clichés like the plague", then you need to re-read this section!

Another common stylistic error in those new to academic writing is to use 'hyperbole' or a journalistic approach. This is where over-emphasis is placed for effect. For example…

The introduction of telemedicine will have an enormous effect on the lives of patients everywhere.

This can't possibly be true in an objective sense. Benefits or otherwise must be presented in a measured way and often require a reference to support the view. Similarly..

The disastrous implementation of new technologies in the UK had led to huge misery.

Again, more like a newspaper headline and not what an academic paper should be representing. It reflects an uninformed and judgemental view.

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5. Clarity vs Complexity

A common mistake made by students new to Higher Education is to assume that use of complex sentences and long words is part of academic writing style. In fact, the use of long words and complex structures often gets in the way of good, clear academic writing. Lecturers tend not to be impressed with a writer's use of long, obscure words and would prefer that the writer made each point as clearly and concisely as possible.

Read the following passage…

"*One would hesitate, however, to sip from the same poisoned chalice as those who would speciously crusade the assertion that literature is quintessentially socially functional. Pose the following interrogative: Would Dante, Shakespeare, or Milton, from their peerless pinnacles, have sullied their art, prostituted the muse which their*

endeavours had enthroned, by indicating something as trivial, as unworthy, as a social purpose? The art of such as these argues another view; that at the heart of all great creative achievement lies a self-justifying, eternally fathomless and sacred mystery"

You can see that the use of clichés, rhetorical questions and over-use of the thesaurus has made this VERY difficult to read. This is **NOT** academic writing.

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6. Coherent Argument

Academic writing requires evidence that the writer has understood **all** the issues that pertain within a topic. You should never begin an assignment with the conclusions already formed. To that end you must have read widely and the written account should reflect this. *Let the literature write your paper, and do not even begin writing until after you have read widely.*

Rarely will there be unanimity amongst a range of authors on a given topic. Your written work should reflect the range of views and the BALANCE of the argument. Are there more authors for or against a particular view? What is the relative 'weight' of each paper (ie. Is it research-based or opinion?) Are there similarities between authors' work?

Your written work should take all this into account and impress the reader with the range of reading undertaken and an ability to bring it all together into one paper. This is

what is often referred to as ‘analysis’ or ‘critical analysis’ in academic writing and it is what markers will be looking for.

Much of your written work will need to be supported by referencing the work you have read. It is possible to draw conclusions on the basis of your reading, but this should flow logically and realistically from the literature presented. This will tend to occur towards the end of a particular section, or in the conclusion. Conclusions should never be personal opinion and should always be free of bias. In academic writing, such conclusions may be known as ‘synthesis’ and are seen as highly desirable but hard to achieve.

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7. Sentences and paragraphs

Just as you should aim for clarity and conciseness in the choice of language, you should aim for the same in the construction of sentences and paragraphs.

It is a mistake to think that long, complex sentences with multiple clauses and sub-clauses will impress the markers. It is often better to use a number of shorter sentences that convey your point clearly.

Paragraphs break up the text into manageable portions: a page is easier to look at if it is divided into 3, 4 or 5 sections. Each paragraph contains a number of sentences which relate to one main idea, along with its supporting detail and evidence.

The first sentence of a ‘typical’ paragraph may begin by introducing the subject of the paragraph. Subsequent sentences develop the theme and should follow each other in a logical sequence. The last sentence sums up the paragraph and/or leads into the next paragraph.

It is usually better to avoid paragraphs which are too short – one or two sentences – as this will inevitably only allow short bursts of information which will tend to be descriptive and not allow the development of ‘analysis’.

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8. Further reading

There are a large number of texts available to help improve writing skills generally. Reading published academic papers will be of enormous benefit. The following books are suggestions…

Cottrell S (2019) *The study skills handbook (5th Ed)* Hampshire. Macmillan (Available in paperback or Kindle format)

Fairbairn G and Winch C (2011) *Reading, writing and reasoning: a guide for students* (3rd Ed). Buckingham. OU Press

O’Hara S (1998) *Studying @ university and college. London*. Kogan Page (old but still very useful)

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