

# What qualities make for a good academic writing?

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Almost all good writing begins

with terrible first efforts.

You need to start somewhere.

Anne Lamott



### 3. Passive? Active?

- Active sentences encourage us to name the specific agent of an action and avoid a few extra words.
- Passive reverses the direct order of agent-action-goal.

Q: Is there any case that the passive is, in fact, the better choice?  
How about sentences like (8), (9)?

(8) Those who are found guilty of murder can be executed.

(9) Valuable records should always be kept in a fireproof safe.

### 3. Passive? Active?

- Think about this question:
  - must our audience know who is performing the action?

Recall (8) and (9)

(8) Those who are found guilty of murder can be executed.

(9) Valuable records should always be kept in a fireproof safe.

It's more than mere clarity!

### 3. Passive? Active?

- Think about these questions:
  - are we maintaining a logically consistent string of subjects?
  - if the string of subjects is consistent, is it the right string of subjects

Q: If the author wants to write about the end of World War II from the point of view of Germany and Japan, do you think (10) is good?

(10) “ By March of 1945, **the Axis nations** had been essentially defeated; all that remained was a final, but bloody, climax. **The borders of Germany** had been breached, and both Germany and Japan were being bombed around the clock. **Neither country**, though, had been so devastated that it could not resist.”

Q: If the author wants to write about the end of World War II from the point of view of Germany and Japan, which one works better?

If the author wants to write about the end of the war from the point of view of the Allied nations, which one should he/she choose?

- (10) By March of 1945, **the Axis nations** had been essentially defeated; all that remained was a final, but bloody, climax. **The borders of Germany** had been breached, and both Germany and Japan were being bombed around the clock. **Neither country**, though, had been so devastated that it could not resist.
- (11) By March of 1945, **the Allies** had essentially defeated the Axis nations; all that remained was a final, but bloody, climax. **American, French, and British forces** had breached the borders of Germany and were bombing both Germany and Japan around the clock. But **they** had not so thoroughly devastated either country as to destroy its ability to resist.

### 3. Passive? Active?

If someone claims that all good academic writing in all fields must always be impersonally third person, always passive, he is wrong.

***Here's the point:***

Some writers and editors avoid the first person by using the passive everywhere, but deleting an *I* or *we* doesn't make a researcher's thinking more objective. We know that behind those impersonal sentences are still flesh-and-blood people doing, thinking, and writing.

In fact, the first-person *I* or *we* are common in scholarly prose when used with verbs that name actions unique to the writer.

## 4. Shorter? Clearer?

- Clear writing does not require Dick-and-Jane sentences
- What counts **is not** the number of words in a sentence, **but how easily** we get from beginning to end while understanding everything in between.





What should/ should not go  
into a linguistic paper?

*“Linguistics is a field that values clarity of expression in writing: a direct statement of one's argument, and straightforward language.”*

--Macaulay 2006

# 1. Writing basics for linguistic papers

## 1.1 Finding a topic

- Approach 1: Check old volumes of journals
  - (a list of LIN journals: <http://linguistlist.org/pubs/journals/browse-journals.cfm>)
- Approach 2: Check reading lists of your courses
- Approach 3: Hear your language and others' language as data
- Approach 4: List questions and brainstorm with your peers

## 1.2 Background Research

Start with a bibliography on the topic you plan to work on and make it as complete as you possibly can

- **Approach 1: Web search**

- Google scholar
- ResearchGate
- Scholars' personal webpage

- **Approach 2: Library resources**

- Linguistic Abstracts in Print

- **Approach 3: Ask professors and TAs for recommendation**

## 1.3 Choose a organizational pattern

- Approach 1: a good scientific method
  - Choose a problem
  - Research your problem
  - Develop a hypothesis
  - Figure out the procedure you will need to follow
  - Test your hypothesis
  - Organize your data
  - State your conclusions

## 1.4 Making an argument

- **Steps in an Argument**

- State the claim You are making
- Introduce supporting evidence, usually in the form of linguistic
- Explain how the evidence supports your claim

- **Mistakes to avoid**

- Don't confuse the notion of making an argument with the notion of having an argument
- Don't present supporting data without explain why the data support your claim
- Don't hedge (e.g., "it might be", "sort of", "it seems")
- Don't argue against a straw man
- Don't claim something is an argument when it's just an observation

The best way to learn linguistic observation is to read a lot of linguistics.

## **1.5 Respect**

- Express your disagreements respectfully
- Nonsexist writing

([www.apa.udel.edu/apa/publications/texts/nonsexist.html](http://www.apa.udel.edu/apa/publications/texts/nonsexist.html))

## **1.6 Avoid Plagiarism**

- Word-for-word Plagiarism
- Mosaic Plagiarism

## **1.7 Human Subjects and Informed Consent**

(<http://research.stonybrook.edu/irbnet>)

## 2. Writing like a linguist

### 2.1 Structuring a Paper

- Numbered Sections
- Introduction
  - A linguistic paper is not a mystery novel  
“This paper examines X, concluding Y. ”
  - Include a Roadmap  
“The paper proceeds as follows: in section 2, I consider X. In section 3, I argue that Y...”
- Conclusion
  - Don't include new data or new facts here.

1. Introduction

2.

2.1.

2.2.

3.

3.1.

3.1.1.

3.1.2.

3.2.

4. Conclusion

References



## 2.2 Using examples, Presenting Data

- **Choosing the Right Example** – the one illustrates only the point you want to make
  - Numbered consecutively
  - Glossed and translated, for examples from an unfamiliar language
- **Following the Conventions in Example Presentation**
- **Incorporating Examples into text**
  - as shown in (12) / see (12)
  - as (1) illustrates/ as illustrated in (1)
  - Consider (2)
  - An example is given below

## 2.3 Citing Linguistic Data

- Linguistic examples, whether English or any other language, if given in their original spelling or in transliteration (which is the original *spelling*, as opposed to pronunciation, converted into Roman letters) are italicized. For example:
  - a. Many English-speakers pronounce *than* and *then* the same.
  - b. Is French *arbre* 'tree' masculine or feminine?
- Alphabet letters or other written symbols that you specifically mention or discuss are enclosed in angle brackets. For example:
  - a. The sound / ʃ / is represented in English most often by the digraph <sh>.
- At the end of the paper you list the sources of information you have referred to (books, articles, web sites, etc.).

# References:

- Williams, Joseph M., and Gregory G. Colomb. 1990. *Style: toward clarity and grace*. The University of Chicago Press.
- Macaulat, Monica. 2006. *Surviving Linguistics*. Cascadilla Press.

# Homework #1, due June 5, 10pm

1. Finish paragraphing exercise;

2. Argumentation exercise:

- Find an article from *Linguistic Inquiry* (<http://www.mitpressjournals.org/loi/ling>)
- Take the article apart, breaking it down into its component parts:
  - Start by listing the sections that the author divides the article into;
  - Look at each section (introduction, content sections and conclusion) and trace its structure
- Write a reflection essay on this article
  - 12pt, Times New Roman, double-spaced, letter size paper, 1inch margin
  - 1-2 page