

The Academic Phrasebank is a general resource for academic writers. It makes explicit the more common phraseological 'nuts and bolts' of academic writing.

# Academic Phrasebank

A compendium of commonly used phrasal elements in academic English in PDF format

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## Writing Introductions

There are many ways to introduce an academic essay or short paper. Most academic writers, however, appear to do one or more of the following in their introductions:

- establish the context, background and/or importance of the topic
- indicate an issue, problem, or controversy in the field of study
- define the topic or key terms
- state of the purpose of the essay/writing
- provide an overview of the coverage and/or structure of the writing

Introductions to research articles and dissertations tend to be relatively short but quite complex. Some of the more common moves include:

- establishing the context, background and/or importance of the topic
- giving a brief synopsis of the relevant literature
- indicating a problem, controversy or a knowledge gap in the field of study
- establishing the desirability of the research
- listing the research questions or hypotheses
- providing a synopsis of the research method(s)
- explaining the significance or value of the study
- defining certain key terms
- providing an overview of the dissertation or report structure
- explaining reasons for the writer's personal interest in the topic

Examples of phrases which are commonly employed to realise these functions are listed below. Note that there may be a certain amount of overlap between some of the categories under which the phrases are listed.

### Establishing the importance of the topic for the world or society

X is a fundamental property of ....

X is fast becoming a key instrument in ....

X is a common disorder characterised by ....

X plays an important role in the maintenance of ....

Xs are the most potent anti-inflammatory agents known.

X is a major public health problem, and the main cause of ....

Xs are one of the most rapidly declining groups of insects in ....

In the new global economy, X has become a central issue for ....

X is the leading cause of death in western-industrialised countries.

Xs are one of the most widely used groups of antibacterial agents and ....

X is increasingly recognised as a serious, worldwide public health concern.

X is an important component in the climate system, and plays a key role in Y.

In the history of development economics, X has been thought of as a key factor in ....

### Establishing the importance of the topic for the discipline

A key aspect of X is ....

X is a classic problem in ....

A primary concern of X is ....

X is at the heart of our understanding of ....

X is an increasingly important area in applied linguistics.

Investigating X is a continuing concern within ....  
Central to the entire discipline of X is the concept of ....  
X and Y have been an object of research since the 1960s  
X is a major area of interest within the field of ....  
The issue of X has received considerable critical attention.  
X has been studied by many researchers using ....  
One of the most significant current discussions in legal and moral philosophy is ...

### **Establishing the importance of the topic (time frame given)**

One of the most important events of the 1970s was ....  
Traditionally, Xs have subscribed to the belief that ....  
Recent developments in X have heightened the need for ....  
In recent years, there has been an increasing interest in ....  
Recent trends in X have led to a proliferation of studies that ....  
Recent developments in the field of X have led to a renewed interest in ....  
Recently, researchers have shown an increased interest in ....  
The past decade has seen the rapid development of X in many ....  
The past thirty years have seen increasingly rapid advances in the field of ....  
Over the past century there has been a dramatic increase in ....  
X proved an important literary genre in the early Y community.  
The changes experienced by Xs over the past decade remain unprecedented.  
Xs are one of the most widely used groups of Y and have been extensively used for ....

### **Synopsis of literature**

Previous studies have reported ....  
Recent evidence suggests that ....  
Several attempts have been made to ....  
Studies of X show the importance of ....  
A number of researchers have reported ....  
Recently investigators have examined the effects of X on Y.  
Factors found to be influencing X have been explored in several studies.  
In the past two decades a number of researchers have sought to determine ....  
A considerable amount of literature has been published on X. These studies ....  
Surveys such as that conducted by Smith (1988) showed that ....  
The first serious discussions and analyses of X emerged during the 1970s with ....  
There have been a number of longitudinal studies involving X that have reported ....  
Xs were reported in the first models of Y (e.g., Smith, 1977; Smith and Patel, 1977).  
What we know about X is largely based upon empirical studies that investigate how ....  
Smith (1984: 217) shows how, in the past, research into X was mainly concerned with ....

### **Highlighting a problem**

However, a major problem with this kind of application is ....  
Lack of X has existed as a health problem for many years.  
However, these rapid changes are having a serious effect on ....  
Despite its safety and efficacy, X suffers from several major drawbacks:  
However, research has consistently shown that these students lack ....  
There is increasing concern that some Xs are being disadvantaged ....  
Despite its long clinical success, X has a number of problems in use.  
Questions have been raised about the safety of prolonged use of ....  
Along with this growth in X, however, there is increasing concern over ....

### **Highlighting a controversy in the field of study**

To date there has been little agreement on what ....  
One major issue in early X research concerned ....  
The issue has grown in importance in light of recent ....  
One observer has already drawn attention to the paradox in ....  
Questions have been raised about the safety of prolonged use of ....  
Debate continues about the best strategies for the management of ....  
In many Xs, a debate is taking place between Ys and Zs concerning ....  
This concept has recently been challenged by X studies demonstrating ....  
The debate about X has gained fresh prominence with many arguing that ....  
More recently, literature has emerged that offers contradictory findings about ....  
One of the most significant current discussions in legal and moral philosophy is ....  
One major theoretical issue that has dominated the field for many years concerns ....  
The controversy about scientific evidence for X has raged unabated for over a century.  
The causes of X have been the subject of intense debate within the scientific community.  
The issue of X has been a controversial and much disputed subject within the field of ....  
In the literature on X, the relative importance of Y has been subject to considerable debate.

### **Highlighting inadequacies of previous studies**

Researchers have not treated X in much detail.  
Previous studies of X have not dealt with ....  
Half of the studies evaluated failed to specify whether ....  
Most studies in the field of X have only focused on ....  
Most studies in X have only been carried out in a small number of areas.  
The generalisability of much published research on this issue is problematic.  
The experimental data are rather controversial, and there is no general agreement about ....  
Such expositions are unsatisfactory because they ....  
The research to date has tended to focus on X rather than Y.  
Research on the subject has been mostly restricted to limited comparisons of ....  
The existing accounts fail to resolve the contradiction between X and Y.  
  
However, few writers have been able to draw on any systematic research into ....  
However, much of the research up to now has been descriptive in nature ....  
However, these results were based upon data from over 30 years ago and it is unclear if ....  
Although extensive research has been carried out on X, no single study exists which ....  
X's analysis does not take account of .... nor does she examine ....

### **Highlighting a knowledge gap in the field of study**

What is not yet clear is the impact of X on ....  
No previous study has investigated X .  
There has been little quantitative analysis of ....  
The neurobiological basis of this X is poorly understood.  
Until recently, there has been no reliable evidence that ....  
In addition, no research has been found that surveyed ....  
Little is known about X and it is not clear what factors ....  
This indicates a need to understand the various perceptions of X that exist among ....  
  
So far this method has only been applied to ....  
So far, however, there has been little discussion about ....  
However, far too little attention has been paid to ....  
However, the evidence for this relationship is inconclusive ....  
However, much uncertainty still exists about the relation between ....

However, there have been no controlled studies which compare differences in ....  
 In contrast, very little is known about X in non-mammalian vertebrates and in ....

Although While Whilst	some research has been carried out on X,	no single study exists which .... no studies have been found which .... no controlled studies have been reported. only two studies have attempted to investigate .... the mechanism by which .... has not been established. there have been few empirical investigations into ..... there is very little scientific understanding of ....
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Apart from Smith (2014), there is a general lack of research in ....  
 Despite this, very few studies have investigated the impact of X on ....  
 Several studies have produced estimates of X (Smith, 2002; Jones, 2003), but there is still insufficient data for ....

### Indicating the focus, aim, argument of a short paper

This paper contests the claim that ....  
 This paper will review the research conducted on ....  
 This paper will focus on/examine/give an account of ....  
 This paper seeks to remedy these problems by analysing the literature of ....  
 This paper examines the significance of X in the rise of ....  
 This essay critically examines/discusses/traces ....  
  
 This account seeks to ....  
 In this paper I argue that ....  
 In the pages that follow, it will be argued that ....  
 This paper attempts to show that ....  
 In this essay, I attempt to defend the view that ....  
 The central thesis of this paper is that ....  
 The aim of the paper is to provide a conceptual theoretical framework based on....  
 The purpose of this paper is to review recent research into the ....

### Stating the purpose of research

The major objective of this study was to investigate .....  
 The aim of this study was to clarify several aspects of ....  
 The aim of this study is to investigate the differences between X and Y.  
 The aim of this research project has therefore been to try and establish what ....  
 The main aim of this investigation is to assess the doses and risks associated with ....  
 The aim of this study is to shine new light on these debates through an examination of ....

The objectives of this research are to determine whether ....  
 The main purpose of this study is to develop an understanding of ....  
 This paper investigates the usefulness of ....  
 This thesis intends to determine the extent to which .... and whether ....  
 This thesis will examine the way in which the ....  
 This research examines the emerging role of X in the context of ....  
 This case study seeks to examine the changing nature of ....  
 This dissertation seeks to explain the development of ....  
 This dissertation aims to unravel some of the mysteries surrounding ....  
 This study systematically reviews the data for..., aiming to provide ....

Part of the aim of this project is to develop software that is compatible with ....  
There are two primary aims of this study: 1. To investigate .... 2. To ascertain ....  
Drawing upon two strands of research into X, this study attempts to ....  
One purpose of this study was to assess the extent to which these factors were ....  
This study seeks to obtain data which will help to address these research gaps.  
This study therefore set out to assess the effect of X ...., and the effect of ....

### **Research questions or hypotheses**

The central question in this dissertation asks how ....  
This research seeks to address the following questions:  
In particular, this dissertation will examine six main research questions:  
The hypothesis that will be tested is that ....  
The key research question of this study was whether or not ....  
This study aimed to address the following research questions:  
Another question is whether ....

### **Synopsis of the research design, method, source(s) of data**

Five works will be examined, all of which ....  
Data for this study were collected using ....  
This dissertation follows a case-study design, with in-depth analysis of ....  
This study was exploratory and interpretative in nature.  
The approach to empirical research adopted for this study was one of ....  
The methodological approach taken in this study is a mixed methodology based on ....  
By employing qualitative modes of enquiry, I attempt to illuminate the ....  
This work takes the form of a case-study of the ....  
Both qualitative and quantitative methods were used in this investigation.  
A combination of quantitative and qualitative approaches was used in the data analysis.  
Qualitative and quantitative research designs were adopted to provide ....  
A holistic approach is utilised, integrating X, Y and Z material to establish ....  
The research data in this thesis is drawn from four main sources: ....  
The study was conducted in the form of a survey, with data being gathered via ....

### **Indicating significance**

This project provided an important opportunity to advance the understanding of ....  
This study provides an exciting opportunity to advance our knowledge of ....  
This is the first study to undertake a longitudinal analysis of ....  
The findings should make an important contribution to the field of ....  
Therefore, this study makes a major contribution to research on X by demonstrating ....  
The study offers some important insights into ....  
This study aims to contribute to this growing area of research by exploring ....  
There are several important areas where this study makes an original contribution to ....

### **Indicating limitations**

The thesis does not engage with ....  
Due to practical constraints, this paper cannot provide a comprehensive review of ....  
It is beyond the scope of this study to examine the ....  
The reader should bear in mind that the study is based on ....  
Another potential problem is that the scope of my thesis may be too broad.  
A full discussion of X lies beyond the scope of this study.

**Giving reasons for personal Interest\***

My main reason for choosing this topic is personal interest.

I became interested in Xs after reading ....

This project was conceived during my time working for X. As a medical advisor, I witnessed ...

I have worked closely with X for many years and ....

It is my experience of working with X that has driven this research.

\* sometimes found in the humanities, and the applied human sciences

**Outlining the structure**

The main questions/issues addressed in this paper are: a), b and c).

This paper has been divided into four parts. The first part deals with ....

The essay has been organised in the following way.

This paper reviews the evidence for ....

This paper begins by .... It will then go on to ....

The first section of this paper will examine ....

This paper first gives a brief overview of the recent history of X.

My thesis is composed of four themed chapters.

The overall structure of the study takes the form of six chapters, including this introductory chapter.

Chapter Two begins by laying out the theoretical dimensions of the research, and looks at how ....

The third chapter is concerned with the methodology used for this study.

The fourth section presents the findings of the research, focusing on the three key themes that ....

Chapter 6 analyses the results of interviews and focus group discussions undertaken during ....

The remaining part of the paper proceeds as follows: ....

The final chapter draws upon the entire thesis, tying up the various theoretical and empirical strands in order to ....

.... and includes a discussion of the implication of the findings to future research into this area.

Finally, the conclusion gives a brief summary and critique of the findings .

Finally, areas for further research are identified.

**Explaining Keywords (refer to *Defining Terms*)**

Throughout this paper, the term X will refer to ....

Throughout this dissertation, the term X will be used to refer to ....

In this article, the acronym/abbreviation XYZ will be used.

According to Smith (2002), X can be defined as follows: "...."

The term X is a relatively new name for ...., commonly referred to as ....

While a variety of definitions of the term X have been suggested, this paper will use the definition first suggested by Smith (1968) who saw it as ....

## A note on academic style

The principal characteristics of written academic style are listed below.

### 1. Evidence-based

Perhaps the most important distinguishing feature of written academic style is that it is evidence-based. Writers support their arguments and claims with evidence from the body of knowledge relevant to their discipline. In addition, any research that is undertaken, must make reference to previous work in the field. As a result, academic texts are rich in attributions to other writers and references to previous research, as seen in the examples below:

- *Previous studies have shown that ....*
- *These sources suggest that from the fifth century onwards .....*
- *According to the 1957 Annual Medical report, the death of the 960 inhabitants of .....*
- *However, as has been shown elsewhere (e.g. Smith, 1992), the increase in .....*

For further examples, refer to the section on **Referring to the Literature** in this document.

In addition, general propositions are usually supported with real examples.

- *This can be seen in the case of ....*
- *A good example of this can be found in ....*

### 2. Words of classical origin

Unlike everyday English, academic writing is characterised by a high frequency of words of classical origin (Greek and Latin). The main reason for this is that Latin was the *lingua academica* during the European renaissance; in other words, it was the international language of scholars. Even up until relatively recently, great works of science, such as Isaac Newton's *Philosophiæ Naturalis Principia Mathematica* (1687), were written in Latin. Even where academic texts were written in English, words of classical origin were used for concepts and phenomena for which there was no equivalent in English.

Although the *lingua academica* of today is English, writers of academic English still tend to use words which are derived from Latin, and also, mainly through Latin, from Greek.

everyday words		academic words
worry	→	concern
story		account
get rid of		eradicate
a lot of		considerable
not enough		insufficient
trouble		difficulty
big		significant
way (of doing)		method
bring together		synthesise
thing		object

There are also some changes to grammatical words (though these are not of classical origin):



everyday words		academic words
not much research	→	little research
not many studies		few studies
isn't any evidence		no evidence

### 3. Cautious

Academic writers are careful about the claims they make: they take care not to appear certain where some doubt may exist, and they are careful not to over-generalise. An example of this kind of transformation can be seen below. The second sentence is in academic style:

- *Drinking alcohol causes breast cancer in women.* →
- *Some studies suggest that drinking alcohol increases the risk of breast cancer.*

For more examples of this kind of language, refer to the section on **Being Cautious**.

### 4. Impersonal

In the interests of objectivity, academic writers tend to remove themselves from the writing. The focus is on 'what' happened, 'how' it was done and 'what' was found. The 'who' (the writer) is not normally given very much attention. This is one of the reasons why personal pronouns ('I' and 'we') tend not to be used. In addition, academic texts rarely address the reader directly and the pronoun normally used for this, 'you', is avoided.

- *You could say that Churchill made some catastrophic decisions early in the War* →
- *It can be said that Churchill made some catastrophic decisions early in the War*

There are some exceptions: in certain disciplines, it may be appropriate for a writer to explain their personal interest in the research area. In some disciplines, the researcher may participate in the research as a participant-observer. In these cases, 'I' will be used. The example below, which illustrates the former situation, is taken from a dissertation in History.

*I became interested in X after reading ..... I hope to convey some of my fascination for the subject, as well as expressing my admiration of the artistic achievements of those involved*

In research undertaken by teams, for example in medicine and science, it is common for the research to be reported using the personal pronoun 'we'.

### 5. Nominalisation

There is a tendency for academic writers to transform verbs (actions) into nouns. In the example below, the verb 'abandoned' becomes the abstract noun 'abandonment'.

- *Unwanted Roman children were generally abandoned in a public place.* →
- *The abandonment of unwanted Roman children generally occurred in a public place.*

As a result of this kind of transformation, academic writing is characterised by long noun phrase constructions, as in: 'the abandonment of unwanted Roman children'. In certain cases, these nominalised forms can become long and complex:

- *the effect of reducing aggressiveness by producing an ACTH-mediated condition of decreased androgen levels*

Although this kind of construction is considered normal in scientific writing, unless the reader is familiar with the constructions, it does make reading difficult as there are so many pieces of information to process in the one sentence. There is an argument that too much nominalisation should be discouraged.

## **6. Rhetorical questions**

Questions to introduce significant new ideas are avoided, and are replaced with statements:

- *Is the welfare system good or not? →*
- *It is important to consider the effectiveness of the British welfare system.*

## **7. Contracted forms avoided**

Contracted forms (e.g. *it's*, *don't*, *isn't*, *aren't*) should not be used in academic writing. The only exception would be if you retranscribing a recorded conversation or interview.

## **8. Precise and detailed**

Last of all, one of the most noticeable features of academic writing is that it is very precise and detailed. This relates to the setting out and development of the thinking and the ideas as well as to the language used in the writing.