



Academic Writing

1 What is it - what is it not?

What is formal writing?

It is usually defined by what it is not. It is not colloquial, not personal, nor is it subjective.

Some characteristics of formal writing:

The academic writer's approach to his or her writing is:

analytical	rather than	impressionistic
objective	rather than	subjective
intellectual	rather than	emotional
rational	rather than	polemical

The academic writer's tone is:

serious	rather than	conversational
impersonal	rather than	personal
formal	rather than	colloquial

1.1 Style

In addition the academic writer makes more frequent use of

- ☒ impersonal pronouns and phrases
- ☒ qualifying words and phrases
- ☒ complex sentence structures
- ☒ specialized vocabulary
- ☒ passive forms of verbs



1.2 Conventions

Some conventions of formal academic writing

Generally:

- ★ avoid words and expressions from spoken English. Colloquialisms are usually inappropriate when using formal language.
- ★ try to remove slang
- ★ where possible, choose more formal vocabulary.

Avoid contractions.

<u>Do not use</u>	→	<u>Instead use</u>
don't	→	do not
wasn't	→	was not
can't	→	cannot
isn't	→	is not
it's	→	it is

Find alternatives to beginning a sentence with so, and, or but.

Instead of

So try As a result / Therefore, / Consequently,

Instead of

And try In addition, / Furthermore,

Instead of

But try However,

(For more suggestions, see the section on Transitions that follows later)



2 Passive voice

The passive voice means changing from phrasing things in this form *"I did this to that object"* to *"that object had this done to it"* – suddenly, you don't need to know that **I** did it.

The use of I, We and You:

How to write in the third person when expressing opinions.

Try to avoid:

- 💣 I believe NATO'S strategy was poorly designed and carelessly implemented.
- 💣 We argue NATO'S strategy was poorly designed and carelessly implemented.
- 💣 You can see NATO'S strategy was poorly designed and carelessly implemented.

The phrases *I believe / We argue / You can see* can be found in academic writing but they are not formal enough for many departments. If you need to be more formal, you have to learn how to use impersonal structures

Try stating the opinion directly . . .

NATO'S strategy was poorly designed and carelessly implemented.

You can also invoke an authority . . .

Fred Bloggs, in his study *NATO in the Nineties* (1997), argues that NATO'S strategy was poorly designed and carelessly implemented. Whether you agree or not will become clearer in the sentences that follow, e.g.

This is confirmed by the catastrophic events that followed.

or

However, this seems to fly in the face of accounts by local inhabitants.



Some other impersonal constructions:

It	is argued	that
it	has been asserted	that
it	will be shown	that
it	can be seen	that

Policy makers	have	claimed	that
Politicians	have	maintained	that
Researchers	have	suggested	that

The critic	Olivia Robinson	disputes
The policy's main opponent,	Dr. Kissinger,	doubts
Dr. George Simpson	questions	

advocates	dismiss
environmentalists	urge
realists	recommend

Exercise: impersonal constructions

Rewrite each sentence by making it more formal, but do not change the author's meaning. It is okay to add words, if necessary. The first one has been done for you.

1. Most people considered that it was a good decision.

It was considered to be a good decision.



2. I think that the government's policy was successful in this regard.

3. It's obvious that this was going to happen.

4. I intend to disprove her argument in my essay.

5. I feel that the fall of communism was a good thing.

6. People were surprised at the results of the election and some were very upset.

7. We all know that the assassination was a desperate attempt to prevent democracy from taking hold in the country.

N.B. For those of you working in departments less preoccupied with rigid adherence to this convention, another advantage of generally using the passive voice is that it adds gravitas to those few occasions and opinions expressed using the active voice; use sparingly and your opinions will carry weight.



3 How to convey emotion while using the passive voice

3.1 Choice of words:

Where you wish to add emphasis deliberately choose either abrupt, staccato synonyms or deliberately more elaborate, grandiose synonyms. Your choice of words or synonyms will relay your judgments. for example think about how different news programmes/papers use language to confer judgements while still appearing impartial

from the obvious

freedom fighter vs terrorist

to more subtle examples such as

spying	vs	intelligence gathering
deeply irresponsible	vs	cavalier
whistle-blower	vs	informant
ploughed into	vs	ran into

Now, try meddling with...

1. The chicken crossed the road.
2. The government is set to backtrack on key areas of the anti-terror laws, the shadow home secretary claims.
3. The detainee was head of the regime's intelligence services before becoming a presidential adviser.

3.2 Style tricks:

1. **alliteration** - beginning a series of two or more words with the same sound
e.g. **big bang**, **condescending**, **convoluted codswallop** and **creative crap** at that - you don't even need an exclamation mark when you've got alliteration - which reminds me - *don't use exclamation marks in academic writing*.
2. **idioms** - phrases that are part of language without being colloquial or clichéd, e.g. straight faced, passing the buck, odds and ends, part and parcel. Use of these could act to lighten the tone of an essay that might otherwise become stuffy, but use with care.
3. **sparsely reverting to the active voice** – as stated at the end of section 2 (if your department is not a stickler for the convention).

In creative writing... (e.g. poetry / prose) you could use the following to great effect (however, in academic writing you would generally be well advised to avoid)

metaphors - comparisons between dissimilar entities expressed as statements of fact, typically using some form of *to be*, e.g. he is a shark/ she's a sausage/ he's putting down roots.

similes - comparisons between dissimilar entities using words such as *like* and *as*, e.g. it was as if the heavens opened

hyperbole - wild exaggeration, e.g. the old cliché *I could eat a horse*



litotes - a form of understatement that implies something by stating that it is not its opposite, e.g. saying *not bad* instead of saying *good*.

anthropomorphism - giving animals/inanimate objects human qualities, emotions or intent, e.g. that step tripped me/ the chair welcomed me/ I left the computer to its own devices.



4 Signposting

There are two aspects to sign posting:

-  the first is saying where you are:
-  the second is saying where you're going / implying relationships that lend structure to your essay as a whole.

4.1 Saying where you are.

One of the problems many of us dyslexics experience is that we're often reluctant to state the obvious, because it's -er- obvious: we tend to go straight for the meat of the argument. However, if you think of the *obvious* as being the "big picture message" or the skeleton instead, it becomes more apparent why its inclusion can help give structure to your arguments.

This can be done by using the **IDEAL** paragraph format, i.e.

- I₁** Introduce the idea (i.e. *the* topic of that paragraph)
- D₂** Define the idea (e.g. new terminology in the paragraph)
- E₁** Explore the idea (e.g. background / relevance / context)
- A₁** Add evidence about the idea (quotes, statistics, etc.)
- L₁** Lastly, conclude (state the obvious)

Holding to this kind of structure will also help you avoid both repetition (sending you over your word count) and not putting in sufficient shoehorning language (which would pull you under your word count). If, after applying the IDEAL format, you're still significantly under or over your word count then there's a very high probability that you're pitching your assignment at the wrong level (either too low or too high respectively)... especially if the second section on sign posting (which'll help improve the *readability* of your essay) also leaves you wide of the mark.



4.2 Saying where you're going - linking sentences & paragraphs:

Use transition words or phrases between sentences and between paragraphs.

- ★ These emphasise the relationships between ideas
- ★ They help readers follow your train of thought or see connections they might otherwise miss or misunderstand.

REMEMBER

All academic writing is written to be read by someone else

HOWEVER,

Some of us become so involved with the hassle of getting things down that we do not think of the person we're writing for. Preoccupied with off-loading our information and ideas we lose sight of our reader.

So, remember:

- ★ you need to show your train of thought
- ★ you need to show how your ideas connect up
- ★ you need to show how your paragraphs are linked

don't fall into the trap of thinking these links are just a waste of space/ "padding" or "fluff" - trying to put your thoughts down using a minimum number of words: this will not help your reader. Instead, connect your work with words and phrases which tell the reader

- ★ what you have done
- ★ what you are going to do
- ★ how your points link up



Now look at some examples of transitional words and phrases – can you think of any others?

ADDITION – *adding more to a point that has already been made*
in addition, again, also, and, besides, finally, first, further, furthermore, last, moreover, second, too, next, indeed, in fact

CAUSE AND EFFECT – *this is where you show the effects of something*
accordingly, as a result, consequently, hence, otherwise, therefore, thus; so, it can be seen that; it is evident that; because of this; this suggests that; it follows that;

COMPARISON
similarly, likewise

CONTRAST – *introducing an alternative viewpoint*
in contrast, although, and yet, however, nevertheless, on the other hand, on the contrary, but, alternatively, against this it could be argued; conversely; on the contrary

EXAMPLES OR SPECIAL FEATURES
for example, for instance, in other words, in illustration, an illustration of this is, in this case, in particular, specifically, evidence to support this can be found in.

CONNECTIONS IN TIME
after a short time, afterwards, as long as, as soon as, at last, at length, at that time, at the same time, before, earlier, of late, immediately, in the meantime, lastly, lately, later, meanwhile, presently, shortly, since, soon, temporarily, thereafter, until, when, while.

SUMMING UP OR CONCLUDING
in brief, in conclusion, in short, on the whole, to conclude, to summarise, to sum up, all in all, on the whole, on balance, it could be claimed, as a consequence of this; in the final analysis



Now look at these examples of 'before' and 'after' paragraphs.

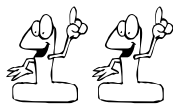
Example one

Before

Harrison's use of the word public asserts his belief that poetry should be available for all. Poetry is not something that readily embraces such a categorisation. Geoffrey Grigson has suggested that poetry is essentially a 'private art'. It is 'the necessary secret possession of select individuals. It isn't choral, it isn't communal [...] it is resistant to vulgarisation.' Alan Bold, has argued that 'there is nothing intrinsically private about poetry'. C. K. Stead has said: 'Poetry is neither 'public' as in the moralist tradition, nor 'private' as in the aesthete's'.

After

It is arguable that Harrison's use of the word public asserts his belief that poetry should be available for all. For some critics, however, poetry is not something that readily embraces such a categorisation. Geoffrey Grigson, for example, has suggested that poetry is essentially a 'private art'. For him it is 'the necessary secret possession of select individuals. It isn't choral, it isn't communal [consequently] it is resistant to vulgarisation.' Alan Bold, on the other hand, has argued succinctly that 'there is nothing intrinsically private about poetry' whereas for C. K. Stead: 'Poetry is neither 'public' as in the moralist tradition, nor 'private' as in the aesthete's'.



Example two

Before

Television has been blamed by researchers for many social problems. Families do not communicate. They do not eat together. Many families have the television on all the time. Children watch unsuitable videos. This may cause psychological disturbance. It may lead to violent and aggressive behaviour.

But television has many good points. People learn more from it, because it is a visual medium. Families can share watching a good film and talk about it. It can pass on news very quickly. It has interesting documentaries. It is good entertainment for people who cannot afford to go out.

After

On the one hand, television has been blamed by researchers for many social problems. The first is that because many families have the television on all the time, they do not communicate. Secondly, they do not eat together. Another criticism is that children watch unsuitable videos and this may cause psychological disturbance. This in turn may lead to violent and aggressive behaviour.

On the other hand, however, television has many good points. For instance, people learn more from it, because it is a visual medium. Moreover, families can share watching a good film and talk about it. In addition, it can pass on news very quickly. It also shows interesting documentaries. Finally, it is good entertainment for people who cannot afford to go out.

The points made in both pieces are the same but the second piece makes the links between the ideas stand out more clearly.



5 Other types of paragraph

If you find the IDEAL paragraph too rigid there are four, more loosely defined examples below. Use of these can provide variety to your style and flow to your arguments. The descriptions of the different types mimic what they are trying to define.

loose:



intro sentence



followed by examples and/or evidence.

mixed:



build up to the central topic



introduce the central topic



this may be particularly useful if the central topic of the paragraph is sufficiently complex that preliminary explanation is required



followed by supporting information

but use these sparingly as they do not provide the reader with good signposting...

certainly, don't start or end a subsection with this type of paragraph.

periodic:



sometimes development is needed



these set the scene for the main topic sentence



so, when the topic sentence finally comes, and ends the paragraph...



the main topic sentence is a logical conclusion and therefore easy to remember.

it should be noted that following a periodic paragraph with a loose (or - better still - an IDEAL) paragraph can be a nice way of linking ideas, which will help your arguments flow.

cyclic:



a cyclic paragraph is a paragraph that starts and finishes with the main topic.



within the paragraph the topic is explored/ evidence is provided



in fact, the IDEAL paragraph format is an example



by starting and finishing with the main topic, a cyclic paragraph provides both a preview and a review of the topic.



6 Tips

6.1 Think about **how** to write as well as **what** to write

However, you may have problems with your short-term memory so if you can mind map/put down an outline note of everything you want to include in your assignment, you won't have to worry about losing the idea while you're thinking about "**how**" to say the "**what**" that you want to say. If you can reduce your levels of multitasking you'll probably also reduce the stress you can experience while writing.

6.2 Avoid repetition

Planning will also help you avoid repetition

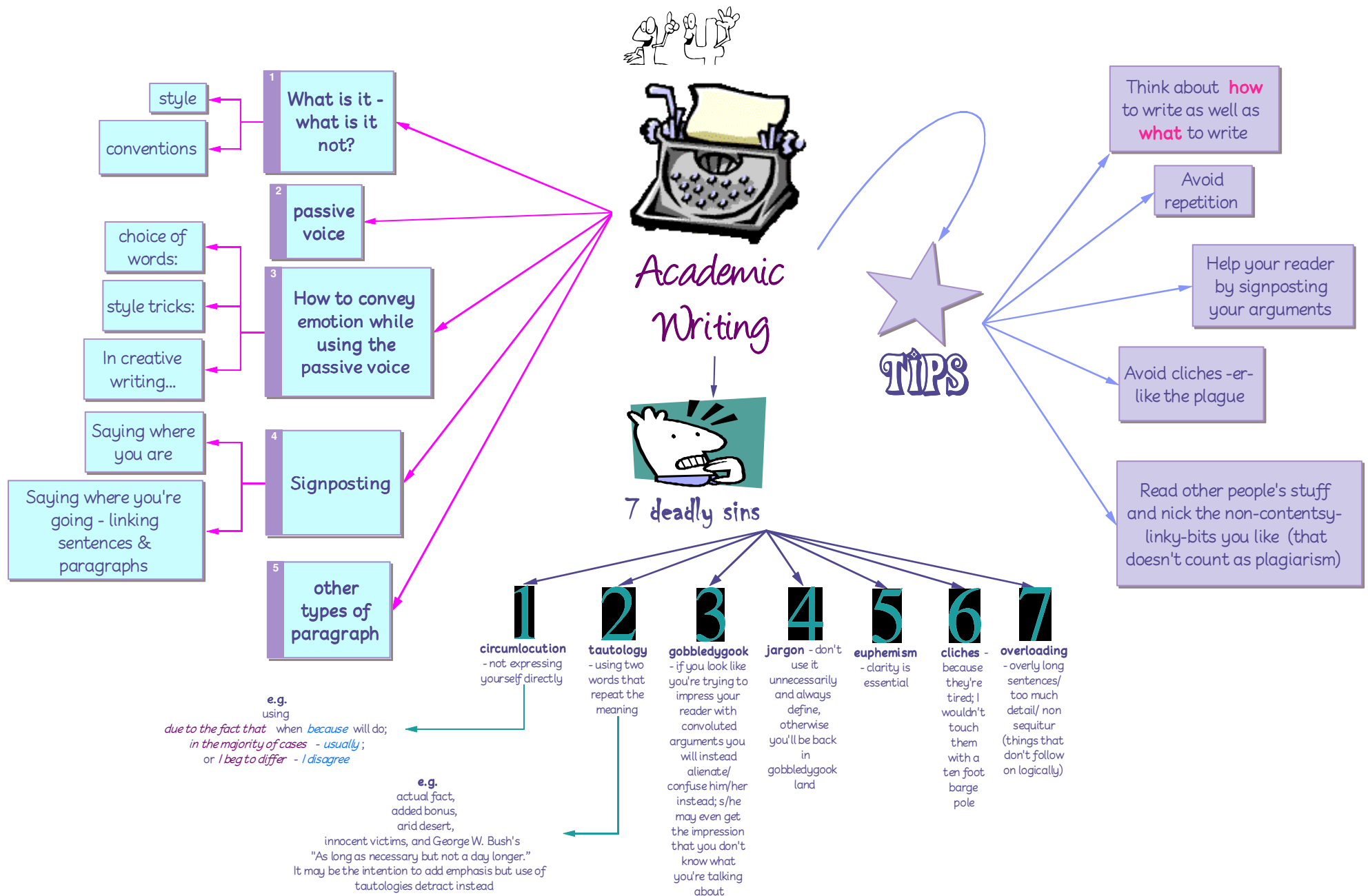
6.3 Help your reader by signposting your arguments

6.4 Avoid clichés -er- like the plague

They're tedious even before you repeat them and therefore are likely to alienate your reader.

Idioms may be more appropriate - they're familiar turns of phrase without being as tired as clichés.

6.5 Read other people's stuff and nick the non-contentsy-linky-bits you like (that doesn't count as plagiarism)





Academic Styles of Writing

Where in this style spectrum you should aim your writing style will depend on your subject/department... see where you think you should be aiming relative to these two extremes of the academic style spectrum

<i>One extreme...</i>	<i>tick where in the spectrum you think your department would like your work to appear</i>	<i>... the other</i>
Every attempt is made to control the conditions under which the research takes place, so that the researcher can decide which variable to manipulate and measure.	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	Every attempt is made to keep the research true to life, i.e. to give it 'ecological validity.'
Results can be generalised, i.e. they would hold true if the research was repeated.	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	The unique is considered worth of study – results may be impossible to repeat exactly.
Numbers and standardised measurements make it easier to generalise results.	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	Creative interpretation is highly valued.
Objective views are formed, based on the evidence and facts rather than personal opinion	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	Subjective responses, feelings, intuition and creativity are regarded as valuable resources.
The role of the scientist is minimised and rarely discussed	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	The role of the researcher is made explicit – it is considered useful to discuss how the researcher's presence influenced the results.
Individual differences are not important – general findings are valued	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	Individual instances, and opportunities for detailed interpretation, are valued.
Personal experiences are regarded as individual and irrelevant: they are not referred to	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	Personal experience is highly valued as giving insight and a deeper understanding
The language used is clinical, neutral, impersonal and dispassionate, even if the researcher feels passionately about the subject.	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	The language allows the personality and feelings of the writer to shine through

Which subjects do you think are at this end of the spectrum?

Which subjects do you think are in the middle?

Which subjects do you think are at this end of the spectrum?



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