

Academic Discourse and the ES1103 Pedagogical Approach

This document provides information on our main topic of study in ES1103: Academic Discourse (including academic reading and writing, text types/genres, how each discipline uses language to share and evaluate their content knowledge). Part 2 of the document explains the teaching/learning approach which we use in ES1103 to help you learn and practise the type of reading and writing which will support your university studies.

1. Academic Discourse

ES1103 is called English for Academic Purposes. As is described in the course information, we will be exploring the language used in your University studies, in other words: Academic Discourse.

The text below, written by an expert in Academic discourse, gives you an overview of what makes academic discourse specific. The text is a good background reading as you start ES1103.

Task: Read and think about the questions below. Then read the text to find the answers.

1. Is academic discourse fact-based or opinion-based?
2. Are some disciplines more oriented towards facts and others towards interpretation? Which ones?
3. Do you think the types of texts and the language vary across disciplines?

This text is adapted from: Hyland, K. (2013). Academic Discourse. In K. Hyland and B. Paltridge (Eds.) *The Bloomsbury Companion to Discourse Analysis*. Bloomsbury Academic: London.

What is Academic Discourse?

Academic discourse refers to the ways of thinking and using language that exist in the academy. The significance of academic discourse, in large part, lies in the fact that complex social activities like educating students, demonstrating learning, disseminating ideas and constructing knowledge, rely on language to accomplish. Textbooks, essays, conference presentations, dissertations, lectures and research articles are central to the academic enterprise and are the very stuff of education and knowledge creation.

What do we know about academic discourse?

Academic discourse has spread well beyond schools and universities. We find traces of it in TV documentaries, popular science periodicals, and the newspapers. It is the carrier of expertise and prestige – the badge of those who possess knowledge and of those who wish to. As Halliday and Martin (1993:11) put it: ‘the language of science has become the language of literacy’.

The common-sense description of Academic language is that it is more formal than daily, conversational language. Differences, however, are much deeper than avoiding slang or short forms. Analysis of academic discourse has identified four main characteristics:

- (1) Academic genres are persuasive and systematically structured to secure readers' agreement;
- (2) These ways of producing agreement represent disciplinary specific rhetorical preferences (in other words, different disciplines convince their readers using different language items/features);
- (3) Language groups have different ways of expressing ideas and structuring agreement;
- (4) Academic persuasion involves interpersonal negotiations as much as convincing ideas.

Academic Texts Are Structured for Persuasive Effect

All academic texts are designed to persuade readers of something: of the knowledge claim at the heart of a research article or dissertation, or of one's understanding and intellectual autonomy in an undergraduate essay. To accomplish these various purposes, writers tend to draw on the same repertoire of linguistic resources for each genre again and again. This is in part because writing is a practice based on expectations. The process of writing involves creating a text that the writer assumes the reader will recognize and expect and the process of reading involves drawing on assumptions about what the writer is trying to do. Hoey (2001) argues that this is like dancers following each other's steps. While writing, like dancing, allows for creativity and the unexpected, established patterns form the basis of any variations.

A range of academic genres have been studied in recent years, including dissertations (Bunton, 2002), conference presentations (Carter-Thomas and Rowley-Jolivet, 2001) and grant proposals (Connor and Upton, 2004). This research demonstrates the distinctive differences in the genres of the academy where particular purposes and audiences lead writers to employ very different rhetorical choices. Table 11.1, for example, compares frequencies for different features in a corpus of 240 research articles and 56 textbooks.

Per 1,000 words	Hedges (may, might...)	Self-mention (I, we, this researcher)	Citation	Transitions
Research Articles	15.1	3.9	6.9	12.8
University Textbooks	8.1	1.6	1.7	24.9

We can see considerable variation in these features across the two genres. The greater use of hedging underlines the need for caution and opening up arguments in the research papers compared with the authorized certainties of the textbook, while the removal of citation in textbooks shows how statements are presented as facts rather than claims grounded in the literature. The greater use of self-mention in articles points to the personal stake that **writers invest in their arguments and their desire to gain credit for claims.**

Note: this relates to the construction of knowledge over time. As knowledge is built through research, it starts as tentative. After years of confirmation, it becomes more certain. As a result, knowledge presented in research papers is more often 'hedged' than when it makes its

Academic Texts Represent Discipline-specific Modes of Arguments

Successful academic writing depends on the individual writer's control of the epistemic conventions of a discipline, what counts as appropriate evidence and argument, and this differs across fields. Essentially, we can see disciplines as language-using communities and this helps us join writers and readers together. Speakers and writers make language choices to fit the discipline community's assumptions, methods and knowledge (Wells, 1992).

In the sciences, new knowledge is accepted through experimental proof. Science writing reinforces this by highlighting a gap in knowledge, presenting a hypothesis related to this gap, and then reporting experimental findings to support this. The humanities, on the other hand, rely on case studies and narratives while claims are accepted on strength of argument. The social sciences fall between these poles because in applying scientific methods to less predictable human data they have to give more attention to explicit interpretation. In other words, academic discourse helps to give identity to a discipline and analyses of texts help reveal the distinctive ways disciplines have of asking questions, addressing a literature, criticising ideas and presenting arguments. Taking the example of hedges, because they represent a writer's direct involvement in a text, something that scientists generally try to avoid, they are twice as common in humanities and social science papers than in hard sciences. One reason for this is there is less control of variables, more diversity or research outcomes and fewer clear bases for accepting claims than in the sciences. As a result, one cannot report research with same confidence of shared assumptions so papers rely far more on recognizing alternative voices (and disagreement). In the hard sciences, writers often disguise their interpretative activities behind linguistic objectivity (no hedging). They downplay their personal role to suggest that results would be the same whoever conducted the research. The less frequent use of hedges is one to the ways of accomplishing this.

Different Cultures Have Different Language Schemata

While we cannot simply predict the ways people are likely to write on the basis of assumed cultural backgrounds, studies have shown that students' first language and prior learning come to influence ways of organising ideas and structuring arguments when writing in English at university. It is useful for students to realise that academic writing in English tends to:

- be more explicit about its structure and purposes with constant previewing and reviewing;
- employ more and more recent citations;
- be less tolerant of digressions;
- be more cautious in making claims, with considerable use of mitigation and hedging;
- use more sentence connectors to show explicitly how parts of the text link together.

Academic Argument Involves Interpersonal Negotiations

Academics do not simply produce texts that plausibly represent an external reality, but use language to acknowledge, construct and negotiate social relations. Analysts have turned their attention to the features which help realise this interpersonal and evaluative dimension of academic texts. Stance and engagement (or sometimes called Appraisal or evaluative language) refers to various rhetorical features which help construct both writers and readers. Stance is an attitudinal dimension which includes features which refer to the ways writers present themselves and convey their judgement or opinions, Engagement, in contrast, is an alignment dimension where writers acknowledge and connect to others, recognizing the presence of their readers.

In a sample study of the use of citations features in various disciplines, it was found that engineers *show*, philosophers *argue*, biologists *find* and linguists *suggest*. These preferences reflect broad disciplinary purposes. So the soft fields largely use verbs which refer to writing activities, like *discuss*, *hypothesize*, *suggest* and *argue*. Engineers and scientists in contrast prefer verbs which point to the research itself like *observe*, *discover*, *show*, *analyse* and *calculate*. This helps scientists represent knowledge as proceeding from impersonal lab activities rather than from the interpretation of researchers.

2. The ES1103 Pedagogical Approach

As an ES1103 student, you will be studying academic discourse in more detail. You will learn general knowledge about academic language and some of the specificities of your own discipline. The approach we take is best explained through these visual metaphors:

	<p>Making the invisible visible</p> <p>We aim to show the hidden knowledge that makes academic writing successful. Just like a rainbow is not a bow but a circle which is partially hidden, we aim to show the invisible linguistic knowledge in academic texts.</p>
<p>Showing the ingredients and the process:</p> <p>We may eat laksa very often, but if we do not know the ingredients and the process of cooking the dish (steps), we will not be able to do this independently. In ES1103, students learn about the ingredients and processes that go into good academic writing.</p>	
	<p>Ingredients change according to context.</p> <p>So you may need a lot of hedging (a type of language feature used to moderate one's claims) in one specific text-type (genre) and nearly none in another. Language in ES1103 is presented as a resource that is dependent on context to help you make the right choices/decisions when writing a text in your different modules.</p>
<p>What are the ingredients to write an assignment in your disciplinary module?</p> <p>By systematically analysing the type of texts you are required to produce, the purpose, structure/stages as well as language. In this respect, ES1103 aims to train you as an analyst of the types of texts and readings you will be exposed to in your undergraduate modules and beyond.</p>	

We adopt a text-analysis/process-writing approach, to both provide you with knowledge of the ingredients and practice of the process of writing. Throughout the semester, you will write several texts, and will experience the several stages of the process of writing (from the initial prompt analysis to the drafting, revising and proof-reading). You will also experience texts as writers and as readers to understand better where texts can be made more coherent, effective or persuasive.