

Academic writing

This factsheet outlines the main features of the academic style of writing which is required at university. It is a skill which takes time to develop and needs regular practice.

Formal

This means that your work is professionally written as well as referenced. It should be grammatically correct with accurate spelling and punctuation. Do not write as you speak, this is called 'colloquial' language. Academic writing is formal, precise, and concise with no emotion. Rather than 'This assignment will look at...' try finding an academic word from the Terms and Definitions factsheet that indicates precisely what you are doing, 'This assignment will evaluate...'. This is called finding your 'academic voice'. You need to ensure that the reader understands the message you are putting across. If your writing does not make sense to you, then you should not expect a reader to be able to understand it.

Structured

At university, your work should be structured into topics and arranged into paragraphs which flow logically from one area into another. To do this you need to plan your writing before you begin. You can always amend your plan if you want to amend the order, add in, or remove a topic. The order given in the introduction should follow through into the main body and the conclusion as this helps the reader.

Evidenced

All academic writing is evidence-based and should not contain your personal views and opinions as these have not undergone academic scrutiny. Your writing should be based upon known facts as researched by the experts in the subject area. Therefore, you need to develop your ability to research thoroughly and reference accurately.

At university you are looking to find where the weight of evidence lies. You should draw assumptions, having interpreted the evidence, and forward these to the reader. To do this you can use hedging language such as: '...this appears to show' or '...this suggests'. However, be aware that the experts are not hedging, they have researched and are sure about their findings so they – demonstrate, highlight, show, note and so on. You need to widen your vocabulary and develop a bank of words to introduce the experts.

Referenced

Every subject studied at the University is linked to a referencing style and you are being trained to reference accurately as you may wish to publish in the future. You need to know which referencing style is required in your subject area.

The 4 referencing styles used at the University are.:

1. The Harvard Style, used by most subjects, and outlined by 'Cite them Right'.
2. The legal referencing style, OSCOLA, which is aligned to The Law Society requirements.
3. The American Psychological Association (APA) style, which is linked to the professional organisation.

Every citation within your writing should link to your reference list.

Accurate

Academic writing is based upon truth and evidence as researched by experts in the field of study. You need to write to ensure the reader understands therefore woolly, imprecise language such as: very, main, key, important should be removed. These words require interpretation by the reader and can confuse. Also, as you are not an expert in the subject area, you cannot make such judgements. Therefore, a 'key' issue just becomes an issue.

As you move through your course into your second and third years, you need to learn to 'critically evaluate' the information you are using and move from paraphrasing towards developing 'critical thinking' by outlining the debates in the subject area. This requires greater research and is based upon the number of experts in the subject area who support a view or not. It also requires a more precise and concise writing style. You will need to decide whether you need to describe or paraphrase, as description will not gain you any marks. Provided your referencing is correct a reader should be able to locate the source of your information.

Balanced

Prior to writing you should gain an all-round view of the topic under discussion. To avoid bias, you need to understand the differing points of view of the experts in the subject area and address these through debate in your work. You must decide what to include and what to omit based upon your assignment brief and learning outcomes.

Relevant

Your writing needs to meet the assignment brief and the associated learning outcomes. You are being trained to remove irrelevant information and to prioritise topic areas for inclusion as this demonstrates your understanding to your tutors. As you move through your course your tutors will expect to see more research and a deeper level of understanding and this will require greater prioritisation as you move towards your final year.

Developing your writing

You need to practice your writing regularly and learn to proofread, redraft and self-assess your work. This requires good time management skills and the ability to motivate yourself to write. Writing is a skill that employers are looking for, so work at presenting yourself precisely and concisely on paper.

Comparing the academic and personal writing styles

Academic Writing	Personal Writing
Logically structured, impersonal, and lacking in emotion	Unstructured, personal and may be emotive
Objective – based upon researched fact	Subjective – views, beliefs and opinions
Is written in the 'passive' voice The student was supported.... Critical thinking was applied... Personal pronouns (I, me, my, we, our...) are removed	Is written in the 'active' voice I supported the student... I applied critical thinking...
Uses formal English Grammar, punctuation, and spelling are used to help the reader understand the message	Can be informally written Abbreviations (e.g., etc.) and contractions (isn't, can't) may be used. Words may be truncated using text speak (l8r)
Is evidence based and referenced	Does not rely upon research or the truth and is not referenced
Is unbiased and has taken account of the whole situation, sorting the relevant from the irrelevant and prioritising areas for inclusion to meet the requirements of the brief	May be biased and one sided. It could present an extreme view, belief, or opinion