# Academic writing style

## What is academic writing style?

Academic writing style is the way in which you submit information, arguments, and ideas in written form to an educational institution. This may, typically, include the submission of essays or reports at university.

## What are the main features of academic writing style?

Academic writing is not a ‘special language’. Instead it is writing which meets academic standards of, for example, accuracy, brevity and clarity. The following will explain each of these requirements, with before and after examples to demonstrate each principle.

## Clarity

The first duty of any writer is to be understood. Academic writing, therefore, needs to be clear and understandable.

**Before**: The synthesis of solipsism with sycophancy within RBS’s climate of elusory exigency evinced an impolitic acquisition of ABN AMRO. (Too clever, hard to understand)

**After*:***The combination of a domineering chief executive, an overly compliant management team and a false sense of urgency were crucial in RBS’s decision to acquire ABN AMRO.(Clear – this is good academic writing)

Read through each sentence of your work – is the point you are making as clear as possible? If not, amend accordingly.

## Brevity

An economical use of words – writing ‘Consequently’ instead of *‘*As a result of this’ –will allow your reader to move through your ideas quickly and efficiently. Writing succinctly, avoiding any padding or waffle, will ensure you work is rich in content, as you will be able to include the maximum number of ideas, information and arguments within the prescribed wordcount.

**Before:** As they read and take down their notes, students must make sure that they keep an accurate record of all their sources. (25 words)

**After***:* Students should record their sources accurately whilst reading and note-taking.(10 words)

## Formality

Academic writing is a form of presentation, and its style should reflect that. Avoiding the use of slang (‘bloke’), jargon (‘punters’), and contractions (‘doesn’t’- write ‘does not’ instead) will help you convey a sense of seriousness and professionalism, in turn helping generate respect for your ideas and arguments.

**Before:**It’s clear that the CEO of RBS’s rushed decision to buy ABN AMRO wasn’t the smartest move.(Too informal – perhaps implying that your thinking is equally casual)

**After:**The combination of a domineering chief executive, an overly compliant management team and a false sense of urgency were crucial in RBS’s decision to acquire ABN AMRO.(Formal)

## Objectivity

Your reader needs to know that the ideas and arguments contained in your writing are the result of an analysis and evaluation of the evidence surrounding the topic. In most cases, writing in the third person, namely ‘this essay will show’ rather than ‘I will show’helps convey this objectivity. The alternative ‘I will show’ may imply that your writing contains personal biases, judgements or emotions. The exception to this general rule is reflective writing, where you may be asked specifically to reflect on a personal experience or action. Additionally, certain subjects, such as philosophy, may ask students to write in a more subjective style.

**Before:** I really feel that wealth needs to be distributed more fairly. (Too emotive, and the first person ‘I’ conveys subjectivity)

**After:**This data suggests strongly that without greater redistribution of wealth, world economic growth will slow.(Objectivity and, even better, an argument)

## Accuracy, precision, explicitness

Good academic writing does not leave the reader wondering exactly what you mean. Avoid vagueness and aim for clarity and precision.

**Before**: Many young people drink too much. (Vague and imprecise)

**After:** One in four 16-25 year-olds consume more alcohol than the Government’s recommended weekly maximum of 14 units per week.(Clear and precise)

**Before:** There are quite a few reasons why micro-SMEs often fail during their first year of operating. (Too vague)

**After:** There are three main reasons why micro-SMEs can fail during their first year of operating: lack of capital, external market factors, and poor business planning. (Explicit)

**Even better:**Whilst micro-SMEs can fail during their first year of operation due to lack of capital or external market factors, the most significant factor is insufficiently accurate business planning.(Both explicit and presents an argument)

## Tentative

At the same time as making strong arguments, academic writing includes a cautionary tone ‘the evidence suggests that’ rather than *‘*the evidence proves’. This is to allow for the possibility of different interpretations of the evidence, or new information later emerging that might affect the debate.

**Before:** This proves that the banking crisis of 2007 was caused by subprime mortgages. (Over-certain)

**Before:** This seems to suggest that subprime mortgages might possibly be partly responsible for some aspects of the banking crisis of 2007. (Over-cautious)

**After:** This suggests that subprime mortgages were a factor in precipitating the banking crisis of 2007. (The right balance)

**After*:*** This strongly suggests that subprime mortgages were a key factor in precipitating the banking crisis of 2007*.*

Words such as ‘strongly’ and ‘key’ can be used to reflect the strength of the evidence or point you are presenting. Being tentative does not mean that you cannot present a strong and persuasive argument.

## Criticality

Academic writing is critical writing. It demonstrates that the writer has analysed, understood and evaluated the evidence surrounding a topic, and has arrived at a ‘position’ or ‘judgement’ that is then expressed as an argument or series of points. Generally, in a piece of academic writing the balance of the text should be: Description short; analysis and evaluation long. This applies across all academic scenarios.

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| **Descriptive writing** | **Critical (academic) writing** |
| Tells the reader what you’ve done | Says why and how, and considers the limits of your research or technique |
| Summarises a piece of literature | Says what it shows, identifies key issues, and explores its accuracy |
| Summarises what is known about a topic | Says why it is important, but identifies gaps and contradictions |
| Gives facts (data, measurements) | Says what they show or suggest, whilst challenging methods |

## A confident authorial voice

Good academic writing has a clear voice, as the writer expresses their arguments or points of view, supported by the evidence which they demonstrate they have analysed and evaluated.

**Before:** Students work best to deadlines (Cottrell,1999, p.23). (information but no voice)

**After:** The survey by Cottrell(1999, p.23)offers clear evidence that students work best to deadlines (the voice of the author is heard)

## Signposting and flow

Finally, academic writing takes the reader from sentence to sentence, paragraph to paragraph seamlessly, using flowing language, such as ‘additionally’ to join one idea to the next. At the same time, signposting language such as ‘The second factor’ will help the reader follow the unfolding of your ideas. Such language can be used for a multitude of purposes.

**Moving on**: Another aspect of the process is the…

**Changing direction:** In contrast, the main disadvantages…

**Introduce evidence:** As Marx (1843) explained: ‘the bureaucrat has the world as a mere object of his action’.

**Demonstrate your understanding:** As Marx (1843) explained: ‘the bureaucrat has the world as a mere object of his action’. In other words, that…

## To sum up – academic writing comprises:

**Clear writing** – write to be understood

**Succinct writing** - allowing for richness of content

**Critical writing** - reflecting an analytical mind at work

**Signposted writing** – helping the reader know where they are

**Flowing writing** – allowing easy movement from idea to idea

**Confident writing** – reflecting clear evidence-based arguments

Learning and improving these skills takes practise. Over time you will expand your vocabulary, learn and be able to inject the technical terminology of your subject into your writing, and develop related skills – such as structuring your written work, and writing introductions and conclusions, all of which will improve the quality of your work. Above all, no piece of writing was at its best at the first draft. Allow time to write your first draft, then improve and revise it in a series of further drafts. Only then will it be as good as it can be, and ready for final-proof reading and submission.

For examples of standard academic writing covering everything from ‘Introducing your sources’ and ‘Being critical’ to ‘Signalling transition’ and ‘Comparing and contrasting’ go to:

[www.phrasebank.manchester.ac.uk](http://www.phrasebank.manchester.ac.uk)

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