

# How is academic writing different from other forms of writing?

*'Talent alone cannot make a writer.'*

Ralph Waldo Emerson

## A Reflection

What are the key characteristics of academic writing?

- Select the appropriate term – more or less – in the middle box.

Generally speaking,  
academic writing

is **more / less** objective  
uses **more / less** referencing  
is **more / less** complex  
has a **more / less** formal structure

than other forms of writing.

## B Contextualization

Compare and contrast the following pieces of writing.

- On the left is an e-mail written by a student. On the right is an essay extract about the same topic.

E-mail (standard writing)

### What is academic English?

Dear Professor Plum,

Please find below my answers to your questions.

I believe academic English and general English are different for the main reason that they have very different goals. Lectures and seminars need a different approach to general spoken English. And, of course, academic essay writing is not the same as standard writing.

I think there are 4 main areas where I can see big differences between standard writing and academic writing. They are:

- You should not be subjective.
- You should be more complex.
- You should have more structure.
- You should use academic style and systems.

Best wishes,  
Sophia

Essay (academic writing)

### Characteristics of academic English

'Academic English' is differentiated from 'general English' in its focus on 'those communication skills in English which are required for study purposes in formal education systems' (Jordan, 1997: 1). Within these systems, there are three main areas of focus: the lecture, the seminar and the essay, each of which has a specific set of sub-skills which are required for successful performance. It is essays where the most significant distinction between academic English and general English is made. Generally speaking, there are four main areas where differences between standard writing and academic writing can be seen: the inherent objectivity of academic writing, its complexity, its formality of structure and its adoption of academic style.



## C Analysis

### What are the key characteristics of academic writing?

It is almost impossible to define good academic writing *exactly*. However, it is certainly possible to identify some key characteristics. The ones listed on the right are four of the most important features.

#### Academic writing ...

- is more objective
- is more complex
- has a more formal structure
- uses more referencing

### Academic writing is more objective

Phrases such as *I think*, *I believe* and *In my opinion* should not be used in academic writing. Academics are not looking for what you think or believe – they want to see what you can show, demonstrate and prove through evidence.

Three specific strategies for achieving **OBJECTIVITY** (illustrated in more detail in Steps 21–23) are outlined below:

- Standard writing: *I think there are 4 main areas where I can see big differences between standard writing and academic writing.*
- Academic writing: *Generally speaking<sup>1</sup>, there are<sup>2</sup> four main areas where differences between standard writing and academic writing can be seen<sup>3</sup> ...*

**Strategy 1: HEDGING LANGUAGE** (*generally speaking*) increases the ‘distance’ between the writer and the text, thereby creating more objectivity.

**Strategy 2:** Empty introductory phrases (*there are*) provide a platform for objective statements.

**Strategy 3:** The **PASSIVE VOICE** (*can be seen*) removes the need for a subject in the sentence. This can be particularly useful to avoid using *I*.

### Academic writing is more complex

As a general principle, academic writing is more complex than other forms of writing. This is because academic writing often discusses difficult, challenging ideas which can only be expressed with particular grammar and language. Areas where this complexity may be seen include:

#### Formality of language

Academic language is more formal than the vocabulary used in other writing.

- Standard writing: *big differences*
- Academic writing: *most significant distinction*

#### Note

Do not mistake ‘complex’ and ‘complicated’. Academic writing should *not* be complicated. It should be relatively easy to follow, written in a clear, direct style.

Therefore, you should *not*:

- use long, difficult words which you do not understand.
- use difficult grammatical structures that you are not confident with.
- make strong statements about issues which you are unable to justify.



## Grammatical structures

There are particular grammatical forms which appear more frequently in academic writing than other writing. For example: the **PASSIVE VOICE**, **NOUN PHRASES** and, as below, **RELATIVE CLAUSES**.

- Academic writing: A specific set of sub-skills which are required for successful performance.

## Density of language

In the passage on page 11, the average number of letters per word of the e-mail is 4.8, whereas it is 5.4 for the sample of academic writing. This 'density' can be achieved through a greater use of **CONTENT WORDS** (such as verbs and nouns) rather than **STRUCTURE WORDS** (such as prepositions and conjunctions). In the example below, the adjective form found in general writing is substituted with a verb form in academic writing.

- Standard writing: Academic English and general English are different ...
- Academic writing: 'Academic English' is differentiated from 'general English' ...

## Academic writing has a more formal structure

All writing has some kind of structure. The structure of academic writing is more formal than other types of writing. The following characteristics may be observed:

- The text as a whole has a specific, formalized structure – the **INTRODUCTION**, **MAIN BODY** and **CONCLUSION**.
- The text must have **COHESION** and **COHERENCE** – it must link together clearly so that it is possible to follow the writer's argument.
- Paragraphs should be roughly the same length throughout, so there is a good overall balance.
- Paragraphs often follow a similar structure – topic sentence, outline of argument, supporting evidence, short conclusion and transition to the next paragraph (see Step 18 for more detail).

## Academic writing uses more referencing

Building on the ideas of other people is one of the central features of academic writing. In order to show where these ideas come from (and to avoid **PLAGIARISM**), a reference system is used (note: the reference system used throughout this book is the Harvard referencing style).

- Standard writing: I believe academic English and general English are different for the main reason that they have very different goals.
- Academic writing: 'Academic English' is differentiated from 'general English' in its focus on 'those communication skills in English which are required for study purposes in formal education systems' (Jordan, 1997: 1).

**D****Activation**

Look at the following pairs of sentences. In each case, decide which is more typical of academic English, and explain why.

1a. I think that the first-person pronoun is not commonly used in academic English.

1b. The first-person pronoun is not commonly used in academic English.

Reason: \_\_\_\_\_

2a. There are a lot of scholars who argue that structure is important in academic writing.

2b. Scholars such as Shih (1986) and Canagarajah (2002) argue that structure is important in academic writing.

Reason: \_\_\_\_\_

3a. 'Hedging language' is never found in standard written English.

3b. 'Hedging language' is more likely to be used in academic English than standard written English.

Reason: \_\_\_\_\_

4a. Academic English has a higher lexical density and grammatical complexity than standard English.

4b. Standard English uses simpler grammar and fewer long words than academic English.

Reason: \_\_\_\_\_

**E****Personalization**

Look at an essay you have written in your mother tongue.

- Compare this to a piece of your non-academic writing (e.g., e-mail, letter, report). What differences do you notice?
- Are these differences the same as or different from the ones in English?

Look at an essay you have written in English.

- Are there any aspects of it which are not 'academic'? How could you improve any of the 'non-academic' elements?

Read an article/book extract in your subject area.

- Identify examples of characteristics of academic writing (the passive voice, formality, hedging language, etc.).

**F****Extension**

Steps 4 and 5 look at how you can use other people's ideas in your writing and **reference** appropriately.

Step 18 explains the characteristics of a **good paragraph** – a key component of good academic structure – while Steps 19 and 20 examine the introduction and conclusion.

Unit E (Steps 21–25) focuses specifically on strategies to make your writing more academic, particularly on: making your essays more **formal**, increasing the **objectivity** of your writing, using **hedging language** and structures and making your writing more **complex**.