

Improving your academic writing

Why improve your academic writing?

- Good, clear writing means others can learn more easily and quickly from your research. This increases the impact you and your work can have in your field and on public health.
- Poor writing is a barrier to publication. Your unclear writing may mean that editors and reviewers cannot see the quality of your research.
- Academic success is often measured in publications. Even if you do good research, if you can't produce a good academic paper, it is difficult to succeed.
- Sometimes the ideas in your research and findings are complicated and complex. This means writing well is even more important as it is already easy for the reader to become confused.
- You carry out studies to answer specific research questions. If your writing is unclear, people may have to guess at your methods, results and conclusions. And they may guess incorrectly, making all your hard work worthless.

How is academic writing different to 'normal' writing?

It is expected that you will use a different style of writing for your academic work than you will for emails, notes and presentations. Academic writing is more formal and has certain set rules. You need to agree to use these rules to be part of the publishing process.

Academic writing is also more permanent than many other forms of writing; you want people to return to your publications for many years. This means any mistakes, odd phrases or confusing sentences will be seen over and over again.

What does good academic writing look like?

Good academic writing is clear, concise, and well-constructed. This means –

- using short sentences (average length around 17 words)
- only one statement per sentence (long sentences with multiple ideas are more likely to be misunderstood)
- using only very few adverbs (adverbs are words like quickly, well, badly)
- not using contractions (e.g. don't => do not, can't => cannot)
- not using relative or subjective terms (e.g don't say "Drug usage is now higher." – higher than what?)
- placing information in the correct section (e.g. do not put your results in the introduction)
- avoiding repetition (e.g. including the same sentences in both introduction and discussion)
- avoiding confusing pronouns (e.g. "Because childhood obesity is a health risk, they should be offered healthier snacks" Who are 'they'? All children? The children you mentioned earlier? Obese children?)

Good academic writing also has these characteristics -

- ✓ It is appropriate for its audience. Think about where the article will be published – is it a very specialist journal or somewhere more generalist?
- ✓ It is unique. You cannot copy sentences from other papers, even if they are yours. Self-plagiarism is still plagiarism and is forbidden by all publishers.
- ✓ It has a good title. An unclear, misleading or just badly written title will stop people clicking on or fully reading your article. With a bad title potential readers may not realize that your work is interesting or relevant to them or that it is of good quality.
- ✓ It has a clear progression of ideas. The order in which you explain your ideas is just as important as the ideas themselves.
- ✓ It is easy, even enjoyable, to read. Good academic writing, while it must obey certain rules, is still simply good writing.

What academic writing is not

Some academic authors use complicated and complex writing with long sentences, long words and lots of jargon. They do this because they think people will assume that because the text is difficult to read, it must be saying something important and intelligent. This is not the case. Most people know that the sign of a good author and researcher is the ability to explain complex ideas in a clear way.

This quote from Aristotle, the Greek philosopher and scientist, shows the idea of clarity in academic writing has been around a very long time - *'A good style must first be clear'* (The Art of Rhetoric, 350 B.C.E.)

7 Quick Tips

1. Read your work aloud; it makes it much easier to spot errors and bad sentences.
2. Get feedback from friends, colleagues or professional editors before submitting your work to a journal.
3. Check journal specifications carefully.
4. Be clear on tenses – present for facts and hypothesis - past for finished studies and results.
5. Use sub-headings.
6. Use the Hemingway Editor www.hemingwayapp.com to check the readability of your sentences.
7. Remember you write an article in a different order than it will be read - 1st figures and tables -> 2nd discussion, results, method, ->3rd introduction, conclusion ->4th title, abstract, keywords.

Improving your academic writing – free online resources

www.writing.utoronto.ca/advice/english-as-a-second-language - 5 part writing guide especially for English-as-a-second-language writers, from the University of Toronto, Canada

www.reading.ac.uk/internal/studyadvice/StudyResources/sta-academic.aspx - 4 part writing guide from Reading University, UK

www.phrasebank.manchester.ac.uk – phrase bank from the University of Manchester, UK, divided into 12 categories to help find the phrase you need

www.adelaide.edu.au/english-for-uni/ - 7 videos to help explain common English errors, from the University of Adelaide, Australia

www.aacc.org/publications/clinical-chemistry/clinical-chemistry%20guide-to-scientific-writing – 14 part Guide to Scientific Writing from the American Association for Clinical Chemistry

If you have any questions about this guide or would like to suggest other topics for our Learning Center please email mahidol.tropmed@gmail.com.