



Academic Writing Guide

Academic writing is a formal way of writing in the university system. It emphasizes objectivity in your argument, formality of your language, and communication with other scholars and readers. To ensure that every discipline can communicate easily, academic writing has specific rules that everyone is asked to follow.

How do I write academically?

There are countless ways to create an academic paper. From different topics to arguments to disciplines, academic writing can be incredibly flexible, introducing unique and creative evidence-based arguments that explore the world in new ways. However, while academic writing requires creativity, like all of academia, there are rules and standardizations. These rules are essential to succeeding as an academic writer.

Why do these rules exist?

Academic writing and different disciplines are standardized to maximize the chance that a paper can be easily navigated and understood by most readers. For example, if every paper in a discipline uses MLA or APA, then citations are easier to understand for those readers. If everyone organizes the paper in the same way, then it is easier to find a “Methods” section or a thesis statement. While these rules are not perfect, they can help your instructors, peers, and other academic readers to find, navigate, and read your paper.

Academic Writing Rules & Tips

Rules:

- **Formal Tone**

- Always use a formal tone in your writing. This means avoiding conversational or casual language.

- **Active Voice**

- Active voice focuses on the actor and sounds clear and concise, while passive voice focuses on the action and sounds awkward.
- Avoid passive voice: “The ball is thrown by Jane,” or “The cake is baked by Ben,” or “The paper was written by Avery.”
- Use active voice: “Jane throws the ball,” and “Ben bakes the cake,” and “Avery wrote the paper.”

- **Avoid Contractions**

- For example, “isn’t” becomes “is not,” “can’t” becomes “cannot,” and “would’ve” becomes “would have.”

- **Evidence to Support Your Claims**

- Show your reader that you are a credible researcher. Evidence shows how you developed your claim and/or that other scholars agree with you.

- **Third-Person**

- Generally, use third-person writing. In other words, things and other people are doing things. “You” and “I” are not. For example:
 - YES: “The study from KSU states that...”
 - NO: “I read in a study that...” | “You see...”

- **Conjunctive Adverbs**

- Use conjunctive adverbs like “however,” “therefore,” “additionally,” “furthermore”, etc. to transition between topics, paragraphs, and sections.

- **Apostrophes for Quotes Within Quotes**

- A quote within a quote uses apostrophes.
 - The author remembers, “I asked Bill if he wanted to go bowling. He said ‘I guess’ unexcitedly.”

Tips:

- **Logical Structure and Organization**

- Outline your papers. Think about how your thought process works. Which claims should come first? Which sections prepare the reader for the next?

- **Avoid Too Many Sources and Quotes**

- A paper is *your* argument and should mainly be *your* words. Too much writing that is not yours silences you.
- This can also be seen as a form of plagiarism, known as “patchwork plagiarism,” if too much of the paper is not your own.

- **Varied Sentence Structure**

- Make sure you vary the sentence types (e.g., *simple, compound, complex, compound-complex*) and your ways of separating sentences and clauses (e.g., *periods, semicolons, em dashes, commas, conjunctions, etc.*).

- **Overly Complex Language and Your Own Words**

- Many think that being overly complex and convoluted is how you write academically. It is not true. Clarity, conciseness, and claims in your own words are always much more valuable.

- **Verb Tense Shifting**

- Pay attention to your verb tense (e.g., *present, past, future*) and keep it consistent. If something is present (*claims/topics*), then make sure those sections are present-tense. If something is past tense (*history*) or future tense (*future solutions*), then keep those tenses consistent as well.

- **Redundancy**

- Avoid repeating the same points or claims. Repetition in a paper can cause the reader to feel boredom or annoyance at the lack of progress. Keep moving forward. Only repeat yourself for intentional reasons.

- **Overgeneralizing**

- Overgeneralizing and absolute language should be avoided. Terms like “always,” “everyone,” or “forever” can harm your writing. It must be arguable. Absolute language leaves no room for argument.

- **Avoid Rhetorical Questions**

- Generally, avoid using rhetorical questions. They can sometimes work, but it can be much more impactful to confidently write the answer as a claim. Your reader wants *your* argument, not ambiguity.