Introduction to Academic Writing

Saturday 24 March 2012
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“It is by writing, even more than by speech, that you actually master your material and extend your own understanding.”

Academic writing is:

- **Formal** (impersonal, no slang, formal sentence structure)
- **Reasoned** (critical thinking: how and why)
- **Impartial** (gives a balanced point of view, more than one point of view)
- **Logical** (ideas flow logically from one to another: signposts, topic sentences and linked paragraphs)
- **Structured** (keeps to the structure of an essay, report etc)
- **Supported** (evidence and examples, referencing)
Academic writing is formal

In academic writing we write more formally than usual.

Exercise: Compare two samples of writing.

Decide which is a sample of academic writing and which is a sample of informal writing. In pairs, identify the different features of each piece of writing.
Academic writing is reasoned and impartial

Academic writing is about thinking and reasoning.

“little evidence of critical thinking” is a frequent comment on student work.

But what is critical thinking?

-thinking well and applying sound intellectual standards to your thinking.

It involves self-evaluation, thinking about your thinking and being sure that you are not to jumping to conclusions.
What does critical thinking involve?

• Assessment of the relationship between claims and the evidence given to support them

• Exercising judgement in order to interpret and evaluate arguments and evidence

• Questioning taken for granted assumptions

• Involves both openness to new ideas and appropriate scepticism
A critical thinker

Questions and evaluates information, for example:

What is really important here?
How does it relate to what I know already?
What standpoint does the writer have?
Are there any weaknesses in the argument that is being put forward?
What other opinions are there on this topic?
Do I agree or disagree with the writer?
A critical thinker

- does not just accept what s/he reads
- does not simply make assertions
- bases arguments on evidence and sound reasoning
- identifies flaws or weaknesses in an argument
- recognises his or her own assumptions, prejudice or point of view
- develops a reasoned, logical argument
A critical thinking warm-up

Read the text:

• What do you think about the argument?
• What do you notice about how it has been put together?
• What do you learn from the statistics?
• Are the conclusions appropriate?
Academic writing is structured

Essay structure

What are the main parts of an essay?

Introduction
Body
Conclusion
References
**Introduction**  usually one paragraph
explains what you are writing
about and how you plan to do it

**Body**  A series of paragraphs (80-90%)
of the essay. Gives details/
evidence to answer the question

**Conclusion**  usually one paragraph, briefly
summarises main ideas and
shows you have answered the
question

**References**  list of sources you used
(APA style)
Academic writing is logical

To create a piece of writing that is logical requires planning. There are a number of different approaches that you can use to plan an assignment.

A good way to plan an assignment is to put down your ideas in bullet points using one page (separate from your essay draft). You can also create a ‘mindmap’ for your ideas or list a series of questions.

Some time planning out what you want to say before you write your essay will help make your writing more logical and save writing time.
Academic writing is logical

Another key aspect in creating a logical piece of writing is involves writing in paragraphs.

A report or essay is made up of a series of related paragraphs.

Have a look at the organisation of the writing on the next slide. What do you notice?
This essay discusses the social and environmental problems associated with the Kaituna River with particular reference to its lower reaches and estuary.

This area has been of particular interest in an ecological, economic and spiritual sense for hundreds of years.

Development of this water resource includes its use for food gathering, transportation, recreation, effluent disposal and drainage.

Impacts resulting from usage and control are pollution, a changed ecosystem, an altered landscape and increased human habitation in the immediate vicinity.

This essay covers: the historical value of the river; its changing status of the past 150 years and how the impacts listed above have affected the river and wildlife during that period.

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Paragraphs help the reader

Paragraphs break up text into manageable portions. A page is easier to look at when divided into three, four, or five sections. Paragraphs also organise meaning. They help your readers to think clearly about what you have written.

An academic Paragraph

-a paragraph introduces and develops one main idea
- the main idea is introduced through a topic sentence, which is usually the first sentence
- all sentences in the paragraph need to relate to the main idea in a logical way
- paragraphs are linked together and flow logically on from each other
- in-text references need to be included in the paragraph if supporting ideas come from other sources.

Some writing pitfalls to avoid

1. Avoid addressing the reader directly or using questions

   • For example: “Does this mean that some strategies are better than others?”
2. Try not to make generalizations.

For example:

"Everyone agrees that cold calling does not produce results".

While this may be true you can only make such statements if supported with evidence.

Instead:

• "According to the Mori Report (2000), cold calling does not produce results."
3. OVERLY-LONG SENTENCES

• *A sentence should express only one idea or a clearly connected set of ideas.*

• Home care has been expanding tremendously over the past few years partly due to recent technological advances that enable assessments and treatments to be a part of the home setting which at one time could only be performed within the hospital environment.

X
• Home care has expanded tremendously over the past few years. This increase is partly due to recent technological advances that now make more assessments and treatments possible in the home rather than only in the hospital.

OK
• 4. WORDINESS - *use the minimum number of words.*

• Check your writing to make sure you don’t have unnecessary words or phrases.
Wordiness

You may often find that there are a number of words contained in your writing that can be safely eliminated without any kind of danger to your meaning whatsoever. X
• You may often find that there are a number of words contained in your writing that can be safely eliminated without any kind of danger to your meaning whatsoever.  

(Beer & McMurrey, 2005, p. 34)

• Be careful not to use redundant phrases
  
  For example:
  
  Alternative choices – alternatives
  
  Actual experience - experience
  
  ‘Various differences” (Various implies difference so you do not need both words)

• Avoid starting sentences with linking words
  
  Such as but, and or yet.

Academic writing is supported

It is important to draw on other sources in your writing.

**Why do you think this is?**

• Using sources strengthens your writing / gives credibility to what you are saying

• Shows you’ve done research and have synthesized the findings into your own words

• Shows your participating in the intellectual conversation within your discipline

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You can incorporate material you read into your own writing by:

- **Quoting** - use the exact words of the author(s). When quoting you usually place the words in quotation marks (“...”)

- **Paraphrasing** – putting the information in your own words

- **Summarising** - express the main points of when it is someone else's opinion, theory or information.

When you incorporate the work of others in your writing you must always reference your sources.
Using evidence to support your argument

An assignment of any type must be based on a logical structure which is your own way of analysing the topic.

Exercise
Referencing

Referencing is a standard method of acknowledging your sources of information and ideas that you have used in your assignment.
Why do we reference?

• To acknowledge another person's intellectual work

• To make it possible for your reader to locate your sources independently

• To demonstrate your knowledge of your field and make your writing more trustworthy

• To avoid being accused of 'plagiarism' (using other people's words/ideas as if they were your own) - “intellectual kidnapping”
When a reference isn’t required

When you include information that is:

• **general knowledge** (e.g. that Barrack Obama is the President of the U.S.A.)
• information that is **common knowledge in your field**
• **ideas** that are definitely **your own**, and findings or insights from **your own research**
Writing is hard work, it takes time and concentration. Good writers aren’t born that way, rather they understand that writing is a process. It can be broken down into stages that make it more manageable.
Steps in the academic writing process

- Analyse the question
- Brainstorm ideas
- Make a plan to guide research
- Do research to get more ideas for your answer
- Sort ideas by planning the essay/assignment structure
- Write drafts
- Prepare references
- Edit and proofread
Analysing assignment questions

It is important to give your lecturer exactly what he/she asks for.

If you misunderstand one word in a question it can be enough to throw your assignment right off track.

It helps to pick out the instruction words, the conditions of any instructions and the key content words.
Analysing questions

**Instruction words** tell you how to answer the question for example:

- Discuss...
- Identify...
- Compare and contrast...
- Evaluate
- **Conditions** make an instruction more specific. For example:
  - Identify two...
  - Refer to class work...
  - Include examples...
  - Outline briefly..

**Key content words** give the topic areas that need to be covered in an assignment.
Brainstorming – 5WH

You can use the **5 WH technique** to form questions using the words above and key words from your readings or lectures. These questions will help you to brainstorm ideas for your assignment questions and guide your research. This technique is a way of 'getting into the topic' and finding out what aspects of the topic you need to research.