

Academic Writing

aka College Writing, Scholarly Writing,

Definition: Academic writing is best described as the way in which the material of academic discourse is formally expressed. It is distinct from other kinds of writing (such as journalism, creative writing, business writing, technical writing, letter writing, etc.) and, while it shares many of the same elements, it has its own set of conventions.

It is the principle means by which scholars share their research and findings with others in the academic community. The other means is for the scholar/researcher/critic to present papers at scholarly conferences.

Conventions: To be successful at accomplishing its purpose, Academic Writing must be clear and it must engage the reader. Or, stated another way, the reader must understand what the writer is saying and grasp its relevance to the reader. These characteristics, clarity and engagement, govern the conventions of academic writing.

Clarity is best achieved when what the piece of academic writing does is predictable. This is most apparent in the structural conventions of academic writing.

Structure: Academic writing always takes the form of claim-based argument. This means, in its simplest form, the writer makes a claim about *something* and supports that claim with evidence. The word *something* is purposely vague – the something varies. It could be a practice or policy, an issue, a value judgement, etc. Additionally, the writer must establish a credibility with the reader

The standard format in academic writing is to present a sequence of ideas in a series of paragraphs, commonly referred to in the academy as a paper. The teaching of academic writing has adopted a convention, using the word “essay” to refer to the product of academic thought or “paper.” A paper is usually composed of a number of “idea units.” Each idea unit (an idea unit may include several paragraphs) in an academic paper features a topic sentence and includes explanation(s), evidence, and illustrations of the evidence supporting the claim.

In addition, each idea unit needs to include explicit or implied “directions” to cue the reader about how to follow the thought sequence captured in the paragraph. These we call *transitions*. To enhance clarity, the paragraphs are arranged in a predictable order beginning with an introduction and followed by a series of idea units that develop the writer’s claim and evidence, ending with a conclusion.

Students learning how to do academic writing sometimes struggle with achieving clarity and engagement. This difficulty can be traced to three factors:

1. Not having single purpose idea units.
2. Failure to express a clear idea.
3. Failure to adequately cue the reader regarding how to correctly follow the thought sequence the writer wants the reader to follow.

Because its purpose is to communicate reasoned thought regarding the *something*, academic writing’s success always depends on achieving clarity.

Other forms of writing such as journalism, letter writing, creative writing – fiction and creative nonfiction – can substitute entertaining or provoking a reader for being clear because their purposes are different. But academic writing to be successful must be eminently clear.