

**LIVERPOOL HOPE UNIVERSITY COLLEGE**

**Introduction to  
Academic Writing**

**A Writing Centre  
workshop**

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## Introduction

Welcome to this workshop, in which we will explore what 'academic writing' means and examine ways in which we can become effective academic writers. Within this handout you will find several exercises, which you may complete and return to the Writing Centre for feedback if you wish.

We hope you find this workshop useful. It is one of a range of services provided to you by the Writing Centre. Please do not hesitate to get in touch if you would like to know more about what the Writing Centre offers.

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## Exercise 1 - Thinking about yourself as a 'writer'

This exercise is intended to help you think about your own personal linguistic history, the ways in which you have written, read or spoken in your life. Try to answer the following questions:

Think back to your childhood and what sorts of writing you had to do. What were the writing tasks at school? Did you write for other purposes?

Did you find writing easy or were there some things that you found particularly difficult? Do you know why?

What sorts of reading have you done over the years and what have you enjoyed?

Have you ever kept a diary or written poetry, a short story or a novel?

Do you write letters regularly?

Have you had to write reports, minutes or formal letters in your work?

Thinking more generally, how did people speak around you when you were growing up? Can you remember different ways of speaking in different circumstances, for example at school or home?

Do you, or did you speak more than one language? If so can you think of any things that you find difficult to say in one language and easier in another?

Now read through what you have written and think about the different kinds of writing that you have done in your life. Write down the ways in which you think writing at University level differs from, or is similar to, other kinds of writing you have done.

The purpose – why are you writing?

The audience – who are you writing for?

The types of writing – how would you describe the writing?

There are no right or wrong answers. You might want to keep what you have written and refer back to it as your writing develops.

Exercise adapted from Creme, P. and Lea, M. (1997) *Writing at university: a guide for students*. Buckingham: Open University Press. (5)

## **What is 'academic writing'?**

From what we have already said, it is clear that you have an instinctive, intuitive understanding of what you are required to do. However, reaching some kind of formal definition that everyone agrees on is quite a different matter. There seem to be as many definitions as there are academics. Here is one:

'... even within the term 'academic writing' there is large variation between both subject area and level. Different writers adopt slightly different styles but what they all share is a use of English which conforms to the rules of standard English as regards sentence construction, punctuation, grammar and spelling and use of appropriate vocabulary.' Open University (2003)

So, what can we learn from that? It seems to be telling us that there are many different ways of writing academically, but they all have one thing in common: they use 'standard' English.

## **What do we mean by 'standard English'?**

'there seems to be considerable confusion in the English-speaking world, even amongst linguists, about what *Standard English* is.' (Trudgill 1999)

While this may be a thorny problem for those who study linguistics, it is not much help to people like us who need a working definition. It may be useful to think of Standard English as just another dialect, like Scouse or Geordie. This is an unusual dialect in that it is almost exclusively written rather than spoken. It is a way of writing that you need to learn in order to communicate with other people in the academic environment. Just as you might have a certain way of talking to your friends or family, you need to learn a certain way of writing down your ideas. It is a dialect that can be learned like any other, and once you can write in fluent 'standardese', it will be a valuable tool that will help you to succeed in your Higher Education career.

## Exercise 2 - Writing in Standard English

The following quotations were gathered from a magazine article aimed at teenage girls. See if you can 'translate' them into Standard English (if you are not sure, imagine how it would be reported in a broadsheet newspaper).

**For example:**

Colloquial speech

**"They usually laugh at my unfunny jokes if they fancy me. It's dead sweet." -  
John Downes, 15**

Standard English 'translation'

**John thinks that girls who are interested in him laugh at his bad jokes. He finds this very endearing.**

Note the use of the third person to report John's opinion, for example: 'John thinks'.

Now you try:

1. Colloquial speech

**"If a girl fancies me, she'll usually tell one of my mates and make sure he lets me know. That's cute." - Callum Cooper, 14**

Standard English 'translation'

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2. Colloquial speech

**"You're in with a chance if they smile loads and try to catch your attention by walking past you lots"- George Richards, 14**

Standard English 'translation'

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3. Colloquial speech

**"If a girl really likes you, she'll do stuff a girl just wouldn't normally do, like ask to play football with you" - Lee Boyle, 15**

Standard English 'translation'

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4. Colloquial speech

**"They always try to make eye contact... but I'm really choosy, so sometimes I blank them! - Sal Iqbal, 19**

Standard English 'translation'

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5. Colloquial speech

**"Some girls will be really smiley or they'll watch everything you do, until you notice them... How obvious is that?!" - Matthew Sampson, 14**

Standard English 'translation'

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6. Colloquial speech

**"Some girls are quite in-your-face. If they fancy you, they'll bump into you at clubs and touch your arm and stuff. It can be a bit scary." - James Marsh, 16**

Standard English 'translation'

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Now compare your answers with some suggested 'translations':

1. A girl who is interested in Callum will usually tell one of his friends and then ensure that the friend tells him. He thinks that this behaviour is endearing.
2. George believes that a girl demonstrates her affection for him by smiling a lot and trying to catch his attention by walking past him frequently.
3. Lee claims that if a girl really likes him, she will engage in stereotypically 'unfeminine' activities such as asking if she can join in a football match.
4. Sal asserts that girls always try to make eye contact with him, but he is particular in his choice of partner, so sometimes he ignores their attentions.
5. Matthew believes that some girls smile and observe his movements constantly. He finds this an obvious indication that they like him.
6. James finds some girls over-confident and claims that in clubs they will attempt to touch him. Occasionally he finds this behaviour unsettling

Examples taken from: <http://www.learn.co.uk/default.asp?WCI=Unit&WCU=97> (accessed 25/09/03)

How do your answers compare with those given above?

A good way to get a feel for Standard English is to read a daily broadsheet newspaper, such as (in no order of preference), *The Guardian*, *The Independent*, *The Telegraph* or *The Times*. The politics are up to you!

A useful 'rule of thumb' to ensure that you are writing in Standard English is to ask yourself if someone from another part of the country, or from another country altogether (e.g. Canada, Australia, U.S.A.), would be able to understand what you have written. Try reading your work aloud, or better still ask someone to read it to you, and listen to the sense of what you are saying. Anything that is unclear or ambiguous should become apparent.

### **What else is 'academic writing'?**

We know that academic writing uses Standard English, but that is not its only characteristic. Here is another definition:

' . . . academic writing must contain an **argument** or **claim**. This means it must address an issue or raise a question and present the appropriate data or information to illustrate it in a logical sequence, and then analyse and comment on it critically - both by reference to sources and by pointing out any illogicalities, such as inconsistencies or omissions. Students are assessed on their ability to select the **appropriate** and **relevant** information to illustrate their argument or claim.' du Boulay, Doreen (1998 - 2000)

So, in addition to using the dialect known as 'Standard English', academic writing must have an argument. It must try to prove or disprove something. It has what might be called a 'thesis': 'a position or proposition that a person . . . advances and offers to maintain by argument' (<http://www.m-w.com/cgi-bin/dictionary>, accessed 25/09/03).

In other words, academic writing is not 'thinking out loud', neither is it 'warming up your engines' or making sure your biro works. The academic reader is not interested in what you have read or the time you have spent in the library. They want to know the **results** of your reading and the time you have spent. They want a reasoned opinion, backed up by sound research.

## **Towards a definition of Academic Writing**

Although it is probably impossible to reach a definition of 'academic writing' that everyone agrees with, we are now in a position to say some general things about what it might be.

When we write anything, whether it is a shopping list or a poem, we are writing for a particular audience and a specific purpose. Academic writing is no different. The audience is the academic community, and the purpose of academic writing is to add to the knowledge of that community. So that academics around the world can understand each other, they use a set of conventions. Once you know what they are, you can begin to write like an academic. Below are some basic characteristics of academic writing, briefly described. The Writing Centre has additional resources on these topics if you would like to explore them in more depth.

## Characteristics of 'academic writing'

### Don't use slang, innit?

We have already touched on this in the section on 'Standard English'. Although it may seem boring, using slang or colloquialisms is not acceptable. If you wrote a paper in your own local dialect, the chances of someone in Canada or Australia being able to understand it are small. 'Most informal or "slang" words are regionally restricted, e.g. the word bloody (as in bloody useless) is unknown in North America.' (Trudgill 1999)

### Example

Colloquial expression

**This experiment is well dodgy**

Standard English 'translation'

**Upon comparison with the control group, the results of this experiment were found to be unreliable.**

Similarly, try not to use contractions.

It's = it is

Don't = do not

They've = they have

## Grammar

' . . . Standard English is a social dialect which is distinguished from other dialects of the language by its *grammatical* forms.' (Trudgill, 1999)

Using what is generally thought of as correct Standard English grammar is perhaps the most important thing you can do to make your writing 'academic'. However, you do not have to concern yourself with morphemes, clauses and modality. As we have seen with Exercise 1, you are an experienced writer who has an instinctive grasp of English grammar. You know what sounds and looks right without having to know all the technical reasons behind it, just as we can use a computer without knowing how to programme it. Your task with academic writing is to know what sounds and looks right within this particular dialect. Reading as much Standard English as you can is probably the best way to get a 'feel' for its grammar. Novels, newspapers and magazines are all good places to start – in fact, the more reading you do of anything at all will add to your skill as a writer.

For more information on grammar, see the GAPS (Grammar Punctuation and Spelling) programme, which can be found on HopeLIVE under Learning Resources.

Helpful books on English grammar include:

King, G. (2000) *Good Grammar*. Glasgow: HarperCollins and Trask, R.L. (2000) *The Penguin Dictionary of English Grammar*. London: Penguin Books

The Writing Centre has one copy of each, which can be viewed by appointment.

## Style

You may have noticed that the passive voice is more frequent in academic writing. As the name suggests, the 'passive' voice means that the subject of the sentence has something done *to it*.

### Exercise 3 – the Passive Voice

#### Example

**Active:** England won the World Cup

**Passive:** The World Cup was won by England.

**Active:** Jane made the dinner.

**Passive:** The dinner was made by Jane.

**Active:** She wrote the book.

**Passive:** The book was written by her.

As you can see, using the passive voice gives a detached and formal feel to your writing.

Now you try:

**Active:** The mouse ate the cheese

**Passive:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Active:** James read the paper

**Passive:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Active:** Sarah drove the car

**Passive:** \_\_\_\_\_

## **Register**

By 'register', we mean the appropriate style and words for a particular set of circumstances. In your case, it means using the specialist language or technical terms for your particular subject. Use appropriate vocabulary (that is, the right words for the job). It may help to find a specialist dictionary or website to which you can refer.

## **Be precise**

Say what you mean and mean what you say. Don't ramble. Confused writing leads to confused thinking. Save trees – don't waste words!

#### Exercise 4 – clear and simple writing

“Obfuscation, ambiguity, lack of clarity, waffle and other things can lead to the central idea getting lost in irrelevant, unnecessary and extraneous detail that is of no consequence, account or relevance to the central tenet or thesis of what it is that you are actually attempting to communicate or get across to those people who may cast their eyes across the fruits of your academic efforts.”

Most of these words do not contribute to the sense of what the author is trying to say. Cross out the unnecessary words and see what you are left with. Rewrite the sentence as concisely as possible:

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As a general principle, use the fewest words possible to say exactly what you mean. Use the simplest words you can. For example, why say ‘writing implement’ when ‘pen’ will do just as well? If you find a sentence is getting too long, split it up into two or more smaller sentences. Use paragraphs to structure your ideas.



## **It is not all about you!**

Do not make statements you cannot justify. Unless you are a famous Professor, you cannot get away with stating your personal opinion and leaving it at that. Everything you say must be justified with evidence or a quotation from another academic or researcher in your field. The ability to weave sources, quotations and other people's ideas (properly referenced!) into your writing is one of the most important aspects of academic writing.

## **Referencing**

Referencing is vitally important. If you do not do it properly, you could be guilty of plagiarism. Plagiarism means taking someone else's idea and passing it off as your own. This could have very serious consequences for your academic career. Fortunately, referencing is not difficult, once you get used to it. For the purposes of this example, we have used the Harvard Referencing System. Check with your tutor if you are not sure which referencing system your subject area uses.

## **And finally - the 'so what?' factor**

Facts do not speak for themselves. Nor will most of the people reading your work have psychic abilities. If you quote someone, or refer to a source, you must explain why. What does it add to your argument? Think of the materials you refer to as bricks. Your argument is the mortar that holds them together. It's not what you know, but how you use it to build an argument and reach a conclusion. Think back to what we said earlier about 'academic writing' having an argument or claim to discuss. **Don't just describe – analyse!** Use facts and evidence selectively. Use them to prove a point or develop an argument – go somewhere! See the Writing Centre handout 'What is an essay?' for more details.

## A quick reminder . . .

### Basic features of academic writing

- It uses Standard English
- It does not use slang or colloquialism
- It contains a claim or argument
- It is logical
- It evaluates and analyses critically
- It uses appropriate and relevant information
- It supports an argument with evidence
- It does not use contractions
- It uses correct grammar, spelling and punctuation
- It uses words precisely
- It uses the right word for the job
- It cites references accurately at all times

We hope you have found this brief exploration of 'academic writing' useful. For more information on anything we have covered today, please get in touch with the Writing Centre. You can make an individual appointment to discuss any aspect of your writing by e-mailing [writingcentre@hope.ac.uk](mailto:writingcentre@hope.ac.uk) or telephoning 0151 291 2048.

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