

# Self Study Programs: Introduction to Academic Writing



This module covers:

- The main characteristics of academic writing
- Analysing texts to identify informal and formal styles of writing
- How to rewrite a text in formal academic style



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# Academic Writing Style

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Academic writing is a style of writing: just as if you write a short story or a newspaper article, there are rules to follow. Following these rules makes you a more credible, convincing writer. It can also help you get better marks because your information is clearly presented.

## **Specific**

Academic writing is concerned with facts rather than vague assumptions. Consider these two statements:

1. *At university students are expected to write academically.*
2. *At James Cook University, students are expected to write academically by using formal language, clear structure and referencing.*

The first is vague; the second is more specific and meaningful.

## **Evidence and Emotion**

Academic writing is based on a critical judgement of complex ideas and information, rather than an appeal to emotions. Your writing should be based on things which can be seen or measured, rather than on personal beliefs. However, some assessments will require you to express your opinion or ideas

### **First, second and third person**

There are three perspectives that a text can be written in.

First person is the author talking about themselves or a group they are part of.

*I often write in first person in emails.*

Second person is the author addressing their reader. This is often used for instructions.

*You should be careful not to write in second person at university.*

Third person removes the author and the reader from the topic being written about.

*It is standard practice at James Cook University for students to write in third person.*

based on your experiences. These exceptions will be made clear in your Subject Outline.

## **Language**

Academic language is clear and concise. You should use formal language, references and supporting evidence to defend your argument rather than try to convince your reader using emotive language or judgemental words such as *terrible, appalling, fantastic, or incredible*. The tone of the words you choose should be formal rather than conversational in style. In other words, the words you choose should feel polite and cordial rather than chatty and pushy. Note how the words *polite* and *cordial* are formal and the words *chatty* and *pushy* are informal, and each suits the style they are describing. Avoid colloquial language: figures of speech, idioms, and clichés.

## **Clarity**

Just because it sounds pretentious does not mean it is academic. Can you understand the following sentence on the first go?

*The research referred to herein showed a multiplicity of factors that contributed to the multiple findings which indicated...*

If your reader has to read each sentence several times they will be confused and probably give up. All your effort researching and writing will be wasted. It is better to be clear and straightforward to get your point across than trying to show off.

## Writing for Your Reader

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Writing for university is like giving a tour. A good tour guide:

- Maps out the journey in a logical order
- Stays on track
- Researches & highlights the main points
- Adopts a confident & appropriate tone
- Maintains audience interest
- Gives a polished presentation

For an assignment, the direction and scope of your tour (assignment), is set out in your Subject Outline and in the Grading Criteria.

## Example of Academic Writing

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A clear topic	→	A method of self-medication in wild animals is the technique of consuming poisonous plants to treat parasites. For instance, research in Africa has found that chimpanzees in their natural habitat sometimes ingest the poisonous <i>Veronia</i> plant. This particular plant produces terpenes, which are toxic. In the correct dosage, the terpenes in <i>Veronia</i> kill intestinal worms while leaving the host animal unharmed. Researchers found that chimpanzees eat only the pith (the soft, spongy centre tissue) of the <i>Veronia</i> plant – where the concentration of terpenes is optimal for the poisoning of parasites – and do not suffer any ill effects. The scientists have not discovered whether this self-medicating behaviour is learned or instinctive, but their research suggests that chimpanzees may understand the concept of dosage, as <i>Veronia</i> often proves fatal to other wild animals that ingest the whole plant. This research shows that chimpanzees and other animals have the capacity to treat parasites with plants from their natural surroundings; other research shows that when plants themselves provide the problem, wild animals employ yet another form of self-medication.
An example...	→	
More detail	→	
Research/facts		

Morgan, S. (2012). *Effective Writing: CU1010 Textbook*. Cairns, Australia: James Cook University.

### Notice how the academic writing:

- refers to research not opinion
- makes statements as clearly as possible without lots of extra words
- each sentence builds on to the one before with examples, more information or discussion
- uses all words in full such as *do not* rather than *don't*
- uses both large and small words because they are the right words, not to show off

This example of academic writing is from a first-year student essay. It is also worth noting that this is an unusual piece of writing for university because it does not have references to indicate where the material came from: you can find more information on using other people's information in the *Summarising, Quoting and Avoiding Plagiarism* workshop and through the JCU Library Guides.

## Your Turn

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Have a look at the numbered sentences below. Each has something that makes it unsuitable for academic writing. Can you tell what the problems are?

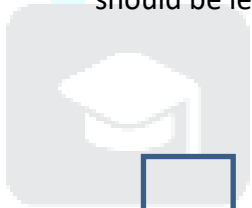
Once you have identified the parts that are not suitable, rewrite them following the characteristics of academic writing.

1. Computers, laptops and mobiles are a number one need for every individual today.
2. It is without a doubt clear and concise that computers have revolutionised this day and age, and allow us to confabulate globally.
3. Everyone loves the WWW, to SMS and play on their PS3!!
4. Computers are beyond amazing and have a massive impact on our lives, and we would unquestionably be lost without them.

## Be a Good Tour Guide

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The following sentences are part of a written assignment on “the need for clarity and logic in academic writing”. Number the sentences in the best order possible and put a cross next to any sentences that should be left out.



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The reader can more easily understand the information if it is presented in a clear and logical manner.

Clarity and logic in academic writing helps both the reader and the writer.

The writer is also benefited as it forces the writer to better analyse the connections between their pieces of information and sequence it accordingly.

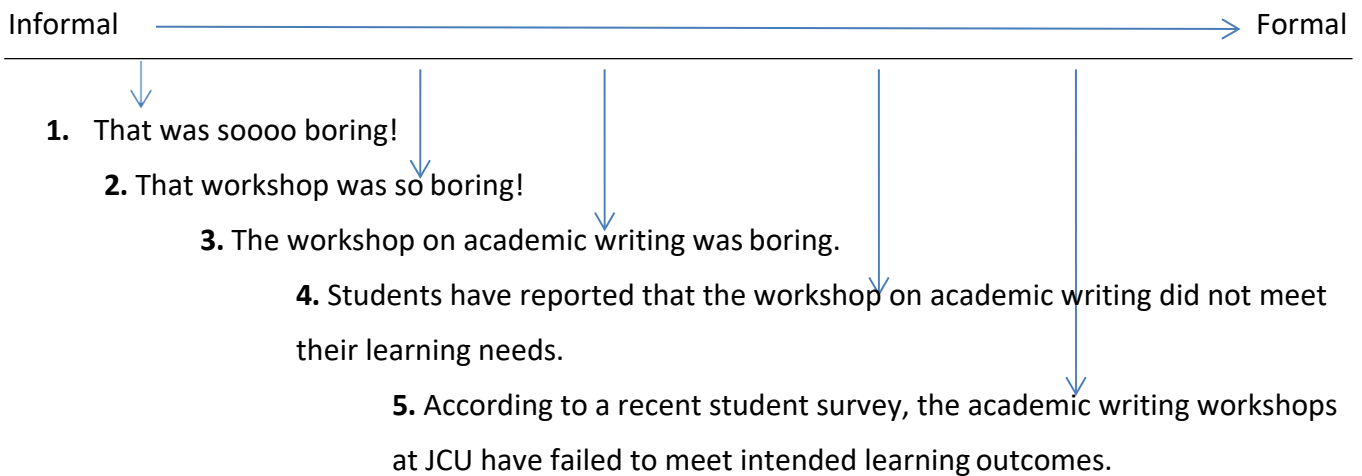
It is for these reasons that clarity and logic is considered a necessity in tertiary institutions.

Writing clearly is also a skill that the writer will carry with them for their lifetime.

Reading effectively is also an important skill at university.

## Walking the line...

Sometimes it helps to think of academic writing as one end of a long line – a continuum – of language that goes from informal to formal. Take a look:



Did you notice how the language became more specific and factual as it became more formal?

Try 'walking the line' in the following example:



## Which is more academic?

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Which is more 'academic' in the following sentence pairs – 1 or 2? Why?

1. There were a lot of students who enrolled at the university to study education.
  2. Five hundred students enrolled in the Bachelor of Education degree at James Cook University.
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1. Statistics from Road Safety Australia show that male drivers accounted for 60% of total traffic accidents in the North Queensland region in 2013, with female drivers accounting for the remaining 40%. These figures suggest that female drivers are more skilled in avoiding traffic accidents than male drivers. From this we can conclude that ...
  2. It is my honest opinion that women are better drivers than men.
- 
1. Thus, based on personality theory as developed by Mr I.M Sure, it is clear that personality is the product of both genetic and environmental influence.
  2. Thus, differences in personality can obviously be attributed to genetic influence. I am sure we have all recognised similar personality traits in ourselves and our parents as well as other siblings. If we would but look at the commonalities in our family trees surely we could see that personality is the product of genetic transfer?
- 
1. The potential for abuse of the proposed voluntary euthanasia legislation, quite clearly necessitates that every State in Australia reject the proposal outright.
  2. The pain that legalising euthanasia would bring to unwitting victims of such legislation far outweighs the pain of any terminal illness and thus such legislation should be rejected immediately.

## Context

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Writing is always influenced by context. Academic writing is just another context in which to write – and, believe it or not, it does become familiar after a while!

See if you can guess the following language contexts.

Pass me that line, would ya.

Spoken by a parent/caregiver

May I take your order?

University assignment

Clean up your room!

Text message

Cairns celebrated in style lastnight with  
a parade along the Esplanade...

Restaurant/Cafe

C U at 11.

Friends fishing

There are several factors indicated in  
successful progression at university.

Newspaper article

### **Need More Assistance? Contact The Learning Centre**

*In person*

Visit a Learning Advice Desk located on the ground floor of the JCU Library (Townsville and Cairns)

*Submit a request online*

If you're not able to access our on-campus services, you can contact The Learning Centre for advice and remote assistance.

Send us a request now using our [contact form](#)

