

Writing in an Academic Style

What is academic style?

Academic style is the style of writing that you should use when writing primarily in a university context. There is some disagreement over details regarding what is accepted as academic style. If you are also studying courses in a Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences or in a Faculty of Science, you may find that there are some differences regarding what is considered academic style. You may even find that lecturers differ from each other. Some lecturers may ask for greater use of the passive voice while others ask you to make greater use of the active voice! In spite of this, it is safe to make some generalisations about the academic style that is valid in most contexts.

What is the cultural context of academic writing?

Academic writing is produced in a context that values:

- analytical skills
- independent thinking
- critical disposition
- an orientation towards ideas
- an ability to rise above the personal and the communal.

What expectations do lecturers have of student writers?

In their writing, students are expected to:

- show understanding of the topic
- explore issues in the field of study
- identify their position in relation to the issues
- use evidence effectively
- display critical and analytical skills
- present a logically persuasive argument supporting their position
- identify the relevance of their argument

Academic English writing:

- has a clear structure. It is evident to the reader from the introduction that the writer has organised his or her thoughts and knows what he or she wants to communicate;
- has fewer clauses per sentence than spoken English, but more words per phrase;
- has more nouns (often abstract ones) than spoken English and fewer verbs;
- makes less use of coordination (joining clauses with *and, or, but*) and greater use of subordination (joining clauses with words such as *while, because, subsequently*) than spoken English;
- almost always uses the third person (*he, she, it, they*), rarely uses first person (*I, we*) and never uses second person (*you*);
- makes limited use of personal pronouns for cohesion (*it, them*), preferring other ways of achieving cohesion e.g. summary words used with *this or these*; repetition of key words/themes.
- avoids colloquial vocabulary e.g. *There are a lot of...*
- avoids contractions (*do not* is used rather than *don't*);
- avoids words that have emotional or attitudinal connotations such as *This has had enormous impact...* instead of *The significant influence of this change may be attributed to...*
- avoids phrasal verbs, e.g. *look into*, preferring single word often polysyllabic verbs, e.g. *investigate*;
- and, uses linguistic “hedgies” (*probably, in most cases, seems, may be*) to qualify generalisations.

What are the differences in the way an idea is expressed in spoken English and in academic written English?

Consider the differences in language use in the following texts. They are both expressing the same idea.

Written text

As companies experience the need for change, they often apply human resource planning to define the relevant issues and develop responses to them. Broadly defined, human resource planning is the process of analysing an organisation's human resources needs under changing conditions and developing the activities necessary to satisfy those needs.

Spoken text

Nowadays companies are finding that they have to change the way they do things and they're finding that human resources planning is really helpful when they have to do this. One reason why it's helpful is because it can help the companies work out what the issues are and then, when you've done that, it can help you make up your mind what you're going to do about it. Basically, human resource planning is what you do when you're going through