

Demystifying Academic Writing

Academic writing is a set of conventions / norms / tropes / “moves” through which we signal our participation in a certain, university-centric writing tradition (in our case, an Anglophone, Euro-American writing tradition). If you’ve ever tried to write a paper that “sounds” academic, you’ve already begun detecting academic tropes and attempting to replicate them. Much of writing (also called rhetoric or composition) education attempts to teach us the “moves” of academic writing.

Writing in the Euro-American Academy

These guidelines are rooted in the norms of the Anglophone, Euro-American academy. The term “academy,” here, refers to an amalgamation of institutions across the planet that produces and disseminates knowledge. We inhabit the dominant segment of this academy that reads, writes, or speaks English. Whole realms of classical and contemporary thought exist outside of this narrow context.

The norms of the Euro-American academy emerge from particular cultural expectations. The Euro-American academy expects writing to emphasize speed and relevance: allowing readers to quickly ascertain main points and determine a book or article’s usefulness to them. These expectations are not “superior” to any other culture’s conventions; they are merely what is normal in our context.

This must be said because there is a lineage of intellectual supremacy in the Euro-American academy. Knowing all this, we have a duty to always ask ourselves:

- Who in our society does or doesn’t have access to the training and resources that allow one to learn academic writing and therefore to produce, access, and use academically accepted knowledge?
- Whose voices am I unaware of due to cultural or linguistic barriers? And who possesses knowledge that is ignored because it isn’t expressed “academically?”
- What social problems are created by these forms of elitism, and what are concrete ways I can challenge elitism in my life and work?

Making Academic “Moves”

As mentioned earlier, we can think about academic writing as a set of “moves,” as in a board or video game. For example, the phrase “For example” is a *move* made in academic writing all the time. This is an academic “move” because it is common in

academic writing, and therefore we can use it to accomplish a task in such writing: to signal to readers that we are about to give an example.

Some academic moves, like “For example,” are optional. Others, like having a thesis statement, are generally required. Additional examples of academic moves include: “Furthermore,” “Nevertheless,” topic sentences, conclusions, and citations. For practice, try listing other moves you recognize as “academic,” or try listing the academic moves you see in this guide.

Academic Genres

Annotated bibliographies, literature reviews, case studies, and research papers are common genres you’ll encounter in your studies. While these generally adhere to the guidelines laid out in this guide, important factors like format, the use of quotations, and the nature of the thesis/argument vary between them. For this reason, rather than applying a universal notion of “academic writing” in all assignments, try asking:

- What kind of literature is this assignment meant to help me practice? What is its purpose in the academic discipline(s) to which it belongs, and how can I support that goal in my writing?
- What moves do other authors make when doing this type of writing? How can I incorporate these into my own writing?

First-Person Point-of-View & Academic Writing

Although many of us have been told that the use of “I” is forbidden in academic writing, this is not a strict rule. Reflective writing assignments are academic but necessitate the use of “I.” More research-focused assignments, on the other hand, usually require a third-person perspective. The best way to know for certain whether/how first-person perspective is appropriate in an assignment is to ask your instructor.

The prejudice against “I” stems from the Euro-American academy’s expectation that scholars sound confident, authoritative, and objective. For better or worse, third-person POV is meant to eliminate the “taint” of subjectivity. This attitude, however, obscures the fact that all knowledge (and/or interpretations thereof) is shaped by the social and personal contexts from which it emerges or is engaged.

For our purposes, we do not need to avoid “I” altogether. Rather, our aim should be to avoid phrases like “I think/believe” and “In my opinion.” These phrases suggest a lack of confidence and undermine our argument. If you notice yourself using these, consider:

- Do I feel particularly uncertain about this part of my argument? Is there a flaw in the logic or evidence that makes this point unconvincing?
- Would additional research/evidence bolster this portion of my argument? Does the argument need to be revised to eliminate weak points? Or, alternatively, do I need to project more confidence?

Structuring Academic Writing

The exact structure of an academic assignment will depend on its genre, so general advice is difficult to give. However, the guide on thesis statements offers some advice for structuring research-style papers, and the guide on reflective writing offers advice for structuring reflective assignments.

Clarity, Concision, & Academic Writing

To write academically is to write clearly and concisely so that readers can swiftly determine the relevance of our writing for their work. Moreover, if your reader can't understand or, worse, misunderstands your argument, they won't be able to follow your logic and arrive at your conclusions. Some questions to ask:

- Have I used more words/sentences in a given paragraph/section than I need in order to convey my meaning? What can I cut?
- Is my grammar clear enough in each sentence that readers can understand my meaning?
- Have I anticipated potential misunderstandings of my argument and made appropriate revisions?

A Note on Practicing Grammar

For those who struggle with English grammar, it can be a good idea to enlist a trusted friend or peer as a proofreader. Be sure to discuss what aspects of your writing you wish to improve, what kinds of feedback are useful to you, and other boundaries. With the aid of an outside perspective, it's easier to spot patterns in grammar mishaps and correct those one by one, slowly but surely improving your writing overall.