Academic Writing in English

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Writing

All writing is meant to be read. There are no exceptions to this; from a best-selling novel with world-wide sales of millions of copies to a private diary to be read only by the person who wrote it, personal lecture notes, or even a shopping list – there would be no point in writing it at all unless someone, at some time, is expected to read it.

It's important to have a clear objective when creating a written document, and this objective will always be centred on the effect the document will have on the reader. It follows from this that whenever we write anything we should be thinking about the potential reader:

- who will read it?
- why will they read it?
- what expectations do they have?
- will they enjoy reading it? (*should* they enjoy reading it?), will they be interested or bored by it?
- what consequences will follow from their reading it? eg, will they act on what they read, and what effects might that have? Will they make judgements about the writer and does that matter? – will the content impress them, make them angry, happy or sad? Will they be convinced by well-presented arguments or evidence, or irritated by bad grammar, spelling, or inappropriate language?

The whole of the document: the order in which ideas are presented, the choice of language, the way the theme or "story" is developed, even the physical layout, should all be consciously designed to have the desired effect on the intended reader.

Academic Writing

Most academic writing is likely to fall into one of two broad categories: to share knowledge gained from original research or collated from the work of others, or to fulfil (perhaps just partially) the requirements for a qualification. There may be secondary objectives, such as to enhance the writer's personal reputation or to build up a body of published work.

Because the readers of a piece of academic writing are likely to be other academics, it's important to show them that the writer understands and complies with their expectations – the generally accepted "rules" of academic writing. Established and respected writers can and do change or break these rules but editors - and examiners - are unlikely to be impressed if anyone else does it.

Structure. The document should be planned so that it follows a clear, logical structure, with each section leading naturally to the next.. What this means in practice will depend on the specific purpose of the document, but as a very generalised guide many academic documents will follow a structure like this:

- The **abstract**. This is a summary of the document's contents. The abstract also serves as an advertisement, or "trailer" for the whole work, which catches the attention of potential readers. Although it comes first, the abstract should actually be the last part to be written.
- **Context**. The first part of the main document might describe the context and background of the contents, eg, the subject of the research. This may be followed by a review of the literature on the subject, explaining what is already known about it and therefore what is still unknown. It's important to "engage" with the literature – ie, to assess the strengths and weaknesses of the various views and theories rather than just report them.

- **Research**. Next, research questions or specific issues may be set out. This can lead smoothly into a discussion about how those questions could be answered or the issues resolved – ie, the available research approaches. The choice of which approach or methodology to use would be explained and defended here.
- **Data**. Here, the data which are collected are recorded.
- **Discussion**. The meaning and implications of the results are considered thoughtfully. Any possible anomalies or ambiguities are acknowledged. In general, the writer demonstrates an ability to make sense of complex and perhaps contradictory results.
- **Conclusion**s. Here, the results are summarised and the key implications are stated succinctly. The writer's personal views can be set out here. The conclusions section is also the place to comment on the limitations of the work and to make suggestions for further studies.

Rigour. Academic writing requires careful logical defence of ideas, propositions or conclusions. All statements need to be supported with evidence, either from previous research or published opinions, or from original research. Other writers' work must be clearly acknowledged and the sources cited using a consistent referencing system. Harvard Referencing is considered the default choice for this.

Style. Academic writing is expected to be formal in style. This usually means that the vocabulary used should be precise, expressing the intended meaning clearly and accurately.

The use of English for academic writing is considered in more detail below.

Academic Writing in English

English is a hybrid language which has evolved over millennia. Until about 8,000 years ago Britain was connected to mainland Europe and was sparsely occupied by people from the continent. Then rising sea levels made it an island. The languages spoken by these first "Britons" are unknown but by 600 BCE the British tribes and their languages are considered to be Celtic, although this is a vague designation. Celtic languages survive today in the British Isles. Welsh is widely spoken in North and West Wales, Gaelic is spoken by smaller numbers of people in Western Scotland and Irish in the West of Ireland. Cornish, a Celtic language spoken in the county of Cornwall in south west England, died out as a "mother tongue" in the late 18th century but a revival movement began in 1904 and the language now has several thousand speakers, some of whom claim it as their first language.

Britain was invaded by the Romans in 43 CE, bringing Latin as the administrative language for the whole island except the northern regions, which later became Scotland. The Romans stayed until around 410 CE, when they abandoned Britain leaving the Celtic tribes to fend for themselves. Soon afterwards, Angles, Saxons and Jutes began to occupy parts of Eastern England. They spoke Germanic languages which form the basis of English as it is today.

From the 8th century CE Scandinavian raiders, known as Vikings, attacked North-eastern England and established kingdoms in the North. They were eventually defeated by Saxon kings who unified England.

In 1066 CE England was invaded and conquered by French-speaking Normans.

Modern English has developed from a blend of Anglo-Saxon and Norman French, enriched by Celtic, Latin and Viking influences. The expansion of the British empire from the 16th Century CE to the early 20th Century added words from India, Africa, China, Oceania and the Americas. Close contact between Britain and mainland Europe has added vocabulary from almost all European languages.

English is now the first or second language of hundreds of millions of people and there are many varieties: Microsoft users can choose from 18 kinds of English as a default language. For most purposes, though, the choice is between US English and UK English. Writers should decide early on which one they intend to use: there are significant differences in spelling and often in the meaning of

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certain words too (although this is most evident - sometimes embarrassingly so - in colloquial expressions).

Formal English avoids the use of colloquial words and expressions and is usually impersonal – ie, it avoids personal pronouns such as I, me, you, your, and contractions or shortened forms of verbs, such as won't, doesn't or it's. The passive voice is often used, for example "40 respondents were asked …" or "it was observed that …".

Composite verb forms often sound informal, eg: "apologise" is more formal than "say sorry", "find out" is less formal than "discover", "put off" is less formal than "postpone".

Formal language may also use longer and more unusual words, often with more precise meanings than less formal vocabulary. This can help to reduce ambiguity and avoid misunderstandings.

When writing, though, it's important to focus on the reader's experience. Excessively formal language can be quite tedious and may sound pretentious.

Academic writing often involves the use of technical or specialised terms and abbreviations. The reader may be quite familiar with these and it's normally acceptable to use them freely. However, any abbreviations, initials or acronyms should always be defined once – either in the text the first time (and only the first time) they are used, or in a separate glossary. It's a matter of judgement whether technical words or phrases should be explained, but it may be prudent to do so to avoid misunderstandings or, of course, to demonstrate that the writer understands their meaning.

Common errors. Anyone who has learned English will have realised very quickly that English spelling is irrational and often contradictory. This is partly due to the diverse origins of the language, but also to changes in spoken English not being reflected in the spelling. There is no "English Academy" to regulate the usage or spelling of English.

Writers for whom English is a foreign language may find it reassuring that native English speakers frequently make mistakes in grammar and spelling

The use of spellcheck software will help, but will not eliminate mistakes with **homophones** (words which sound the same but are spelt differently and/or mean something different) where both the correct and incorrect words are in the dictionary. The website http://www.singularis.ltd.uk/bifroest/misc/homophones-list.html lists 441 UK English homophones, although some of these are quite obscure. Some of the more common ones include:

complement/compliment
council/counsel
fair/fare
hear/here
higher/hire
it's/its
lessen/lesson
practice/practise
principal/principle
right/rite/wright/write
ring/wring
some/sum
stationary/stationery
there/their/they're
to/too/two
weak/week
weather/whether
who's/whose
your/you're

Eliminating contractions will avoid some of these, eg: they're = they are, you're = you are, it's = it is, but careful proof-reading is essential.

The use of the **apostrophe** causes great confusion among English speakers. Apostrophes are used in English for two purposes:

1. to indicate possession. Possession is normally indicated by adding **'s** to a singular noun, as in *the captain's table* (the table belonging to the [singular] captain) or **s'** to a plural noun, as in *the students' bar* (the bar belonging to the [plural] students).

Irregular plurals (ie, ones that don’t end in s) like children, people, men, women, form their possessives by adding an apostrophe + s: children’s, people’s, etc..

2. to show where letters have been omitted, as in *didn't* (did not) or *it's* (it is) and legitimately (but rather confusingly and less commonly now) in abbreviations such as photo's (photographs).

It is wrong to use an apostrophe in possessive adjectives such as his, hers, ours, theirs or its, because they are already possessive. It is very common indeed to see the possessive *its* misspelled as *it’s*, but it is still wrong!

Apostrophes are not used in the formation of plurals, although this is a common error seen in shop signs and elsewhere constantly, eg: bean’s, egg’s, onion’s or [allegedly] asparagu’s).

Native English speakers often make mistakes in **grammar** and/or the meaning of words. Some of the more common ones include:

Fewer <> less fewer refers to items that can be counted, less refers to “uncountable” quantities, eg fewer ice cubes, less water.

Disinterested <> uninterested disinterested means unbiased, objective, impartial, neutral, without prejudice. Uninterested means indifferent, unconcerned, not interested.

Affect <> effect *Affect* is a verb meaning to change or influence something. *Effect* is normally a noun referring to the change that occurred (it can be used in other ways but these are less common).

Lay <> lie *lay* is a transitive verb requiring an object. *Lay* is its present tense as in “I lay one brick on another” (ie, I’m doing it now). Its past tense is *laid* as in “last week I laid 50 paving slabs for my new patio”). *Lie* is an intransitive verb which doesn’t need an object. *Lie* is its present tense as in “The Pyrenees lie between France and Spain” and its past tense is *lay* as in “the broken wing mirror lay in the road”. A common mistake is to use the past tense of the transitive *lay* as in “I *laid* on the beach” instead of the intransitive past tense of *lie* (“I *lay* on the beach”).

Have is an auxiliary verb used to form compound tenses: “I have been to Poland before”, “he should have completed the work by now”. These verb forms are often abbreviated: “I’ve been to Poland before”, “he should’ve completed the work by now.” The abbreviated word *have* can sound rather like *of,* leading to the grammatical error: “he should *of* completed the work by now”.

I and **me**. Confusion sometimes arises about which pronoun is appropriate. The rule is that the pronoun *I* should be used when I am the subject of the verb: ie, I am the one doing the action, as in “I will show you the plans; I am working on the assignment”.

The pronoun *me* should be used when I am the object of the verb, ie someone else is doing the action to/for/with me, as in “you can show me the plans” (or show the plans to me), “send the assignment to me when it’s completed”.

These examples describe simple situations, and mistakes would be unlikely; few English speakers would say “send the assignment to *I* when it’s completed”, or “*me* will let you know when it’s ready.” It would sound quite wrong.

When an additional person is involved, though, mistakes are very common, but the principle doesn’t change, eg “John and I will send you the plans”; “Sarah and I are working on the assignment”. In these examples *John and I* / *Sarah and I* are the joint subjects of the verb (the ones doing the action), equivalent to the plural pronoun *we*.

If we are the objects of the verb (the ones to or for whom the action is being done by someone else) the correct form would be as shown in the following examples:

“You can show John and me the plans” (or “show the plans to John and me”); “send the assignment to Sarah and me when it’s completed”. This is equivalent to using the plural pronoun *us*.

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It is always wrong (although very common indeed) to use I as an object pronoun, eg, "show John and I your ideas" or "send the assignment to Sarah and I".

A simple check is to take the other person out of the sentence temporarily: "show ~~John and~~ I your ideas" would clearly show that something wasn't right. Or substitute one of the plural pronouns (we, us) for "John and I": "show *we* your ideas" would also certainly sound wrong!

It's also wrong, but still quite common, to use *me* as a subject pronoun, eg, "Sarah and me will take care of it", "Dave and me are going to the bar after this session."

The full set of subject and object pronouns is as follows:

	Subject Pronouns	Object Pronouns
1st person singular	I	me
2nd person singular	(thou ~ no longer used; you is used instead)	(thee ~ no longer used; you is used instead)
3rd person singular	he, she, it	him, her, it
1st person plural	we	us
2nd person plural	you	you
3rd person plural	they	them

This isn't, of course, a comprehensive guide to academic writing, but it may help to avoid some of the more common errors which are seen in the work of native English speakers as well as writers for whom English is a foreign language.