



Essay Writing

Style



UNIVERSITY
OF WOLLONGONG
AUSTRALIA

Knowing how to structure an essay is necessary but not sufficient. You also need to know about academic style and referencing. Style is influenced by the context (institution and audience), so that writing for a university lecturer might be very different from writing about the same topic in another context (eg on social media or in a workplace). University writing is typically formal and objective, avoiding slang and unsubstantiated opinion. Essays are also written for assessment by people who are familiar with (and expect) certain conventions and referencing practices of the discipline. Learning to write in an academic style is an important aspect of learning to write university essays. It means making your writing *structured*, *formal* and *objective*, and often also *abstract* and *complex*.

- Structured** Most academic writing has to present and develop a logical argument. Without a clear, logical structure it would be difficult to follow the development of complex arguments.
- Formal** Academic writing creates 'distance' between readers and writers. Scholarly discussion is not generally personal and friendly conversation amongst friends, so much as impersonal communication about complex ideas and issues amongst peers or superiors.
- Objective** Academic writing is generally expected to be rational and unemotional in presenting arguments, which are supported by evidence, and make impartial, sound judgments.
- Abstract** Academic writing refers to 'things' that are conceptual rather than concrete – periods of time, types of situation, patterns that can only be seen through specialist instruments.
- Complex** Academic writing tends to discuss ideas, concepts and techniques that require a whole discipline and a specialist vocabulary to know and understand. The concepts cannot necessarily be understood easily or quickly.

COMPARE

Which of the following two paragraphs sounds more formal or suitable for an academic text?

Example 1	Example 2
<p>Capital is a complex notion. There are many definitions of the word itself, and capital as applied in accounting can be viewed conceptually from a number of perspectives; that is, there is legal capital, financial capital and physical capital. The application of financial and physical conceptualisations of capital is not straightforward as there are various permutations of these concepts applied in the business environment ...</p>	<p>Capital is a difficult thing to understand. We can explain it in different ways, and in accounting we can look at it from different angles. Accountants talk about different types of capital, and there are different ways to use the concepts too, and it's a bit confusing when people in business use the same word differently ...</p>

What do you notice in the wording that makes one more formal than the other?

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In the first example, a more formal style is achieved by:

- using technical terms (legal capital, financial capital, physical capital)
- avoiding informal words, personal pronouns, contractions (thing, we, look at, talk about, angles, it's, a bit, people in business)
- passive voice (can be viewed)
- nominalisations (application, conceptualisations)
- complex noun groups (capital as applied in accounting, various permutations of these concepts, application of financial and physical conceptualisations of capital)

Differences also occur across the various disciplines of a university (compare writing in biology with writing in the humanities). However, the language features evident in the first example contribute to an appropriate academic style.

SUPPORTING AN ARGUMENT WITH EVIDENCE

Essays are characterised by an objective style and the use of evidence to support the arguments being presented: arguments cannot be presented without such supporting evidence or they may sound as if they are just the writer's opinion. This evidence cannot be anecdotal, but must be published or known by authorities in the field. It must be integrated well into the structure of the overall argument, into paragraphs and into sentences. It must also be referenced so readers can easily see the source of your evidence.

INTEGRATING EVIDENCE

When it comes to using the evidence you've gathered, check your essay plan – references to the literature can only be integrated into an argument where they actually support a particular point you want to make. The evidence has to play a clear role in explaining, expanding or illustrating a specific point in a paragraph. In the example paragraph below, notice that information from source materials has either been rephrased in the writer's words, or presented as a quote and placed in a position that allows it to expand or extend the point the student writer is making in the topic sentence.

Example: using evidence effectively

One phenomenon that can impact greatly on the effectiveness of groups is that as group sizes increase there is a tendency for the effort put in by the group to be less than the average effort put in by individuals engaged on the same task separately (Gabrenya, Latane & Wang 1981; Albanese & Van Fleet 1985). The phenomenon has been described using various terms. Writers influenced by industrial economics describe it as the 'free-rider problem', where the collective nature of the 'contract' obscures the fact of one member failing to honour their part of the contract (Albanese & Van Fleet 1985: 230). Organisational psychologists tend to label the phenomenon as 'social loafing' and typically define it as "one where everyone puts in a little less" (Gabrenya, Latane & Wang 1981:120). Whatever the terminology used to describe this phenomenon, it is problematic for groups.	<i>topic sentence</i>
	<i>expansion</i>
	<i>integration of paraphrased material</i>
	<i>integration of paraphrased and quoted material</i>

When too much quoted or paraphrased material is used in a paragraph, it can seem as if it is just a string of information without any 'tying together' by the writer. Notice, by contrast, how difficult it is in the following example to identify the 'voice' of the student writer amongst the various 'bits' of information presented, or to relate those bits to each other:



Example: using sources ineffectively

Gabrenya, Latane & Wang (1981) and Albanese & Van Fleet (1985) note that as group sizes increase there is a tendency for the effort put in by the group to be less than the average effort put in by individuals engaged on the same task separately. Albanese & Van Fleet (1985) report on the 'free-rider problem', where the collective nature of the 'contract' obscures the fact of one member failing to honour their part of the contract. Gabrenya, Latane & Wang (1981:180) discuss the phenomenon of 'social loafing' and typically define it as "one where everyone puts in a little less".

When incorporating the ideas and words of others into your writing, you must incorporate them into **your** argument, and not present their words **instead** of your own argument. Your essay should present your view, and use evidence from other sources only to support what your essay is arguing.

REFERENCING SOURCES

As a writer, you need to support your arguments with evidence from the published literature, in such a way that your readers can easily find those sources. There are several different referencing conventions, and you need to follow the style guide that is preferred in your discipline.

The style used most commonly at UOW is the author-date (Harvard) system. Another method is the use of in-text numbers and endnotes. To reference sources accurately and completely, you need to both cite the source within your text briefly (either by author-date or number, depending on the style guide you are following), and provide complete bibliographic information in a reference list at the end of your text. All in-text citations must match the end-of-text references. All this provides the necessary evidence that you have consulted genuine sources of good information.

Always refer to the UOW Library guides to referencing, and check with your subject lecturer which style you should be using: <http://uow.libguides.com/refcite>

Example: in-text citation of sources

The work of van Lawick-Goodall (1971), Kortlandt and van Zon (1968), and Wright (1972) shows that present-day chimpanzees, orangutans and macaque monkeys are capable of using simple tools and bipedal locomotion. Wright (1972, p.305) concluded after experiments with a captive orangutan, that manipulative disability would not have prevented Australopithecines from mastering the fundamentals of tool technology. However, while there is validity in comparing the behaviour of present-day apes with early hominids, it is important to note that, as Howells (1973, p. 53) says, "a Pantrogloodyte is not and cannot be the ancestor of man. He cannot be an ancestor of anything but future chimpanzees". However, van Lawick-Goodall (1971, p. 233) suggests that the modern chimpanzee shows a type of intelligence closer to human than is found in any other present-day mammal. She argues that:

... the chimpanzee is, nevertheless, a creature of immense significance to the understanding of man ... He has the ability to solve quite complex problems, he can use and make tools for a variety of purposes ... Who knows what the chimpanzees will be like in forty million years hence? (van Lawick-Goodall, 1971, pp. 244-245).

*name & year of publications
page number used when referring to a specific idea*

direct quote, include page reference

quotes longer than three lines are indented (no quotation marks)



Example: Reference list

- Gould, S.J. 1977, *Ontogeny and Phylogeny*. Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press.
- Lovejoy, C.O. 1980, "The origin of man", *Science*, vol. 211, pp.340-350.
- Savage-Rumbaugh, E.S. 1986, *Ape Language: From conditioned response to symbol*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Wolpoff, M.H., Zhi, W..X. & Thorne, A.G. 1984, "Modern homo sapiens origins: A general theory of hominid evolution involving the fossil evidence from South-East Asia". In F.H. Smith & F. Spencer. (Eds.) *The Origins of modern humans* New York: Alan R. Liss Inc.

These conventions make it easy for your reader to find the information you've presented as evidence in your essay. Whether or not you quote or paraphrase, if you have read and been influenced by an author's central idea or argument, you need to cite their name and the publication year of their work. If you refer to a specific idea or wording that can be located on a particular page of a publication, you should also include the page number in your citation, so that your reader can easily find that specific information within the article or book.

