Learning Development | Student Services

Essay writing

3. The mechanics of essay writing

Knowing how to structure an essay is important but knowing what style to write in and what conventions to use are equally important. This unit will look at what makes a piece of writing sound academic.

Academic style

An important aspect of learning to write university essays is learning to write in a suitable academic style. This refers to the structured, formal and objective nature of academic writing. The language used in academic writing is also often abstract and complex. Let's look at each of these characteristics in more detail:

Structured	The structured nature of academic writing can be attributed to the requirement of presenting and developing a logical argument. Without a clear, logical structure it would be difficult to follow the development of complex arguments.
Formal	The formal nature of academic writing is due to 'distance' between readers and writers. That is, students and scholars writing in the university context aren't writing personal, friendly correspondence; they are writing formally for peers or superiors about complex ideas and issues.
Objective	The objective nature of academic writing is due to the need for rational, impersonal and unemotional argument that implies impartial and sound judgment. Such argument is supported by evidence.
Abstract	Academic writing is abstract and less concrete because writers are most often writing about abstractions or 'things' such as a period of time, or a bacterium or a concept, and less often about individuals or specific situations.
Complex	Finally, academic writing is complex due to the nature of the ideas and concepts being discussed as well to the technical nature of the many specialist terms used within disciplinary writing.

We know about the structure of academic writing from reading the last unit, but what does formal, objective, complex and abstract writing actually look like? Let's consider two paragraphs and compare their different styles. Which paragraph sounds more formal or suitable for an academic text? Can you think why one sounds more formal than the other?

Example 1	Example 2
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 standpoints; that is, **there is** legal capital financial capital and physical capital. **The application of financial and physical concepts of capital** is not straightforward as **there are** various **permutations** of these concepts applied in the business environment.	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** legal capital financial capital and physical capital. How **we apply** financial and physical concepts of capital **isn't easy** because people in business **use** it **differently.**

1. The process: the multi-faceted nature of essay writing

2. The argument: development and structure

3. The mechanics of essay writing

Learning objectives

This module will help you to:

- understand the process involved in writing a university essay
- research the topic
- write analytically
- structure and develop an academic argument
- write in an academic style
- present evidence and reference correctly

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In the first example, you'll have noticed the more formal style has been achieved by the use of more technical terms, more formal language, passive voice instead of active voice, modal verbs, and nominalisations and complex noun groups.

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 standpoints; that is, there is legal capital, financial capital and physical capital. **The application of financial and physical concepts of capital** is not straight-forward as **there are** various **permutations** of these concepts applied in the business environment …

technical language, *capital legal capital etc.*

There is/there are construction. This helps the writer avoid using first person pronouns *(I, we)*, which would result in a more personal, conversational style.

passive voice *(can be viewed)*. This construction allows the writer to focus on the 'thing; being discussed rather than on the person or thing carrying out the action.

the use of modal verbs such as *can* in *can be viewed conceptually* allows writers to make claims with the right level of certainty, e.g. *can be viewed* as opposed to *are viewed*.

formal expressions rather than everyday *language.* Compare *permutations/versions, complex/hard, conceptually/we see it as …, concepts/ideas*

the use of nominalisations and complex noun (or nominal) groups such as *Capital as applied in accounting and the application of financial and physical concepts of capital.* (See the *Academic English* module for a detailed discussion of nominalisation and complex nominal groups and their role in academic writing).

In the second example there are a number of grammatical features which contribute to the more informal and personal nature of this paragraph.

- **everyday language.** *difficult thing, can look at it, easy*
- **phrasal verbs.** *look at, talk about*
- **first person plural pronouns.** *we*
- **contractions.** *isn't*
- **active voice.** *we apply, people use,*

Needless to say, distinct differences are apparent in different types of writing in the various university disciplines (compare for example, writing in biology with writing in a humanities based discipline). However, the language features evident in the first example contribute to an appropriate academic style. For more detailed information about the features of academic writing, refer to the module Academic Writing.

Supporting your argument with evidence

A significant feature of essay writing that relates to the objective nature of academic writing and academic style is 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 evidence but must be already published or known information presented by authorities in the field. It must be integrated expertly into the structure of your overall argument, into your paragraphs and into your sentences. It must also be cited or referenced so that your readers are clearly able to see the source of your evidence.

Integrating evidence into your own writing

When integrating the evidence you've gathered into your essay, you must first look at your essay plan to decide where evidence needs to be placed in relation to the

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points you're making. Then you need to look at the particular paragraph in which a piece of evidence belongs to decide how it can be integrated, remembering that its role will be to support or expand on a point you've already made in your own words within that paragraph. In the paragraph below, you'll notice that information from source materials has been rephrased in the writer's own words or presented as a quote and placed in a position that allows it to expand or extend the point the writer is making in the topic sentence.

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 then 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 and Van Fleet 1985: 230). Writers who are 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 one that is problematic for groups.	topic sentence *explanation* *integration of paraphrased material* *integration of paraphrased and quoted material*

When too much quoted or paraphrased material is used in a paragraph, it can seem as if it is just a string of information from one source or another without the writer's ideas or 'voice' tying the bits of information together. Notice how difficult it is in the following text to extract from the 'bits' of information any ideas or thoughts of the writer, or even any way to relate the 'bits' of information to each other.

> Gabrenya, Latane and Wang (1981) and Albanese and 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 and 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 and 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/or words of others into your writing, you must incorporate those ideas and words into your argument, and should not present those words or ideas instead of establishing an argument. Your essay should present a clear argument and should use evidence from other sources only to support what your essay is arguing.

You should also integrate the actual words of your sources into your essay in such a way that fully grammatical sentences are always constructed. In the following sentence,

> Writers who are organisational psychologists tend to label the phenomenon as 'social loafing' and typically define it as one "where everyone puts in a little less."

the author's words "where everyone puts in a little less." have been integrated so that the writer's eventual sentence is completely grammatical. This is vitally important: if you don't create a grammatical sentence when integrating a quote or paraphrased material, the meaning of what you want to say and what the original source said may be lost.

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Referencing your evidence: following academic conventions

There are several different referencing conventions that are part of academic writing but they all relate to a writer's need to support his or her arguments with evidence and a reader's need to find and evaluate the source of that evidence. To do this you need to provide source information (author, year of publication, and page numbers) for the evidence you've presented within your essay as well as full details of source information as a reference list or bibliography at the end of your essay.

To provide supporting information within your essay you can provide in-text references to authors' works within your paragraphs and sentences (generally referred to as the Harvard or author-date system). This is the method of referencing used in the paragraph above on free-riding or social loafing. Another method is the use of footnotes or endnotes. For more detailed instructions on how to use in-text referencing, endnotes and footnotes, see the self access module Referencing.

To provide full details of your source information you should provide a reference list or bibliography at the end of your assignment. A reference list refers to all the books, articles and web sites that you actually referred to in your assignment. A bibliography refers to all the material you read in preparation for your assignment, even those you did not provide quotes from. Your lecturer or tutor will instruct you on whether your assignments require a reference list or a bibliography. The reference list or bibliography must be set out in the particular format required by your discipline or department. Below is an example of a reference list which would be attached to the end of your assignment. The comments on the right highlight some of the formatting characteristics found in reference lists and bibliographies.

hanging indents: in this examples hanging indents have been used; however, this is not a requirement.

References

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.

book titles are in italics

journal names should be in italics; the title of journal articles should not be.

if you don't have access to a word processor for using italics, you should underline journal or book titles.

Other conventions you should take note of are also those to do with making it easy for your reader to find the information you've presented as evidence. When you wish to use an author's central idea or argument, for example, you must cite the author's name and the year of publication but you may leave out page numbers as the original text will have referred to that central idea many times within the text. When you refer to just one idea of many in a publication, however, you must include page numbers. This allows your reader in follow-up reading to find what might be a quite small piece of information inside what could be a large article or book. Look at the paragraph below to see how a writer has referenced source material of different kinds.

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Example 3: Referencing source material in your essay	
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 locomation.	*name and year only (refers to main idea)*
Wright (1972, p. 305) concluded after tool using experiments with a captive orangutan,that manipulative disability is not a factor which would have prevented Australopithecines from mastering the fundamentals of tool technology. However, while there is an unquestionable 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 Pantroglodyte 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 that of man than is found in any other present-day mammal.	*page number to refer to one idea*
She argues that:	*direct quote, so a page reference is included*
… 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 makes 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).	*a quote longer than three lines is indented (quotation marks are not included)*

When you've finished writing the first draft of your essay, you might use a checklist to make sure that your essay conforms in structure and style to academic expectations. Don't forget the importance of proof-reading your essay as a last step before handing it in. For a detailed guide to proofreading see the self access module **Editing your assignments**.

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