

Writing in Academic Style

What style of writing is preferred in the Australian School of Business?

In your courses in the Australian School of Business you are required to write many different types of assignments. Each different assignment type has its own preferred structure. In some cases you are asked to imagine you are writing a report for a client, or for a senior manager, or sometimes for the public at large. The style of English you use will depend on the purpose of the assignment, the preferred structure for that assignment type and the audience for whom it is intended. Occasionally you will be required to write in an informal style for the public or in a journalistic style. Sometimes you will be required to write in a professional style, but most often you will be required to write in an academic style.

What is academic style?

Academic style is the style of writing that you should use when you are writing primarily for your lecturer. There is some disagreement over details regarding what is accepted as academic style. If you are also studying courses in the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences or in the 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 and some ask you to make greater use of the active voice. In spite of this, it is safe to make some generalisations about academic style that are 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

How does the purpose of written academic English differ from that of spoken English?

Spoken language is a verbalisation of the process the speaker is going through while thinking about his or her position on specific issues.

Academic writing is the product that results from thinking – the end point or result of the process of thinking.

How does academic English differ from journalistic English?

In your studies in the Faculty of Business you will be required to read many newspaper and magazine articles. You may sometimes be influenced by the style of writing in those articles and want to use it in your assignment writing. A journalistic style, however, is not an appropriate style to use in an assignment requiring academic writing.

Most newspaper and magazine articles consist of very short paragraphs, each of which has one piece of information intended to grab the readers' attention. The connections between the sentences and paragraphs are not always very clear. This may even be because the sub-editors have to cut chunks out of the original articles to achieve the required length. Journalists often use very colourful language that is intended to have an emotional affect on the reader. Emotional language should be avoided in academic writing.

How does academic English differ from text-book English?

Some students believe that if they write their assignments in a similar style to the one used in their text books they will be writing in academic style. Unfortunately, this is not always advisable. Some text books are a collection of articles written by scholars in the field for other scholars in the field. The writing in these books will be in academic style. But other text books are written by experts whose main concern is to teach the basic ideas of their subject to students who have little understanding of the field.

In this case, text-book writers try to write in a way that suggests they are speaking to students. They use an informal style with many everyday examples. Try not to copy this style, since you, as a student, are not in a position to teach the subject about which you are writing to your lecturer or tutor.



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 (Refer to the EDU Handout : 'Editing your Writing for Content, Coherence and Cohesion').
- ★ 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, might 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