

## Organizing Your Social Sciences Research Paper: Academic Writing Style

This guide provides advice on how to develop and organize a research paper in the social and behavioral sciences.

<https://libguides.usc.edu/writingguide/academicwriting>

### Definition

Academic writing refers to a style of expression that researchers use to define the intellectual boundaries of their disciplines and their specific areas of expertise. Characteristics of academic writing include a formal tone, use of the third-person rather than first-person perspective (usually), a clear focus on the research problem under investigation, and precise word choice. Like specialist languages adopted in other professions, such as, law or medicine, academic writing is designed to convey agreed meaning about complex ideas or concepts for a group of scholarly experts.

### Importance of Good Academic Writing

The accepted form of academic writing in the social sciences can vary considerably depending on the methodological framework and the intended audience. However, most college-level research papers require careful attention to the following stylistic elements:

#### I. The Big Picture

Unlike fiction or journalistic writing, the overall structure of academic writing is formal and logical. It must be cohesive and possess a logically organized flow of ideas; this means that the various parts are connected to form a unified whole. There should be narrative links between sentences and paragraphs so that the reader is able to follow your argument. The introduction should include a description of how the rest of the paper is organized and all sources are [properly cited](#) throughout the paper.

#### II. The Tone

The overall tone refers to the attitude conveyed in a piece of writing. Throughout your paper, it is important that you present the arguments of others fairly and with an appropriate narrative tone. When presenting a position or argument that you disagree with, describe this argument accurately and without loaded or biased language. In academic writing, the author is expected to investigate the research problem from an authoritative point of view. You should, therefore, state the strengths of your arguments confidently, using language that is neutral, not confrontational or dismissive.

#### III. Diction

Diction refers to the choice of words you use. Awareness of the words you use is important because words that have almost the same denotation [dictionary definition] can have very different connotations [implied meanings]. This is particularly true in academic writing because words and terminology can evolve a nuanced meaning that describes a

particular idea, concept, or phenomenon derived from the epistemological culture of that discipline [e.g., the concept of rational choice in political science]. Therefore, use concrete words [not general] that convey a specific meaning. If this cannot be done without confusing the reader, then you need to explain what you mean within the context of how that word or phrase is used within a discipline.

#### **IV. The Language**

The investigation of research problems in the social sciences is often complex and multi-dimensional. Therefore, it is important that you use unambiguous language. Well-structured paragraphs and clear topic sentences enable a reader to follow your line of thinking without difficulty. Your language should be concise, formal, and express precisely what you want it to mean. Do not use vague expressions that are not specific or precise enough for the reader to derive exact meaning ["they," "we," "people," "the organization," etc.], abbreviations like 'i.e.' ["in other words"], 'e.g.' ["for example"], or 'a.k.a.' ["also known as"], and the use of unspecific determinate words ["super," "very," "incredible," "huge," etc.].

#### **V. Punctuation**

Scholars rely on precise words and language to establish the narrative tone of their work and, therefore, punctuation marks are used very deliberately. For example, exclamation points are rarely used to express a heightened tone because it can come across as unsophisticated or over-excited. Dashes should be limited to the insertion of an explanatory comment in a sentence, while hyphens should be limited to connecting prefixes to words [e.g., multi-disciplinary] or when forming compound phrases [e.g., commander-in-chief]. Finally, understand that semi-colons represent a pause that is longer than a comma, but shorter than a period in a sentence. In general, there are four grammatical uses of semi-colons: when a second clause expands or explains the first clause; to describe a sequence of actions or different aspects of the same topic; placed before clauses which begin with "nevertheless", "therefore", "even so," and "for instance"; and, to mark off a series of phrases or clauses which contain commas. If you are not confident about when to use semi-colons [and most of the time, they are not required for proper punctuation], rewrite using shorter sentences or revise the paragraph.

#### **VI. Academic Conventions**

Citing sources in the body of your paper and providing a list of references as either footnotes or endnotes is a very important aspect of academic writing. It is essential to always acknowledge the source of any ideas, research findings, data, or quoted text that you have used in your paper as a defense against allegations of plagiarism. Equally important, the scholarly convention of citing sources allow readers to identify the resources you used in writing your paper so they can independently verify and assess the quality of findings and conclusions based on your review of the literature. Examples of other academic conventions to follow include

the appropriate use of headings and subheadings, properly spelling out acronyms when first used in the text, avoiding slang or colloquial language, avoiding emotive language or unsupported declarative statements, avoiding contractions, and using first person and second person pronouns only when necessary.

### **VII. Evidence-Based Reasoning**

Assignments often ask you to express your own point of view about the research problem. However, what is valued in academic writing is that opinions are based on what is often termed, evidence-based reasoning, a sound understanding of the pertinent body of knowledge and academic debates that exist within, and often external to, your discipline. You need to support your opinion with evidence from scholarly sources. It should be an objective stance presented as a logical argument. The quality of your evidence will determine the strength of your argument. The challenge is to convince the reader of the validity of your opinion through a well-documented, coherent, and logically structured piece of writing. This is particularly important when proposing solutions to problems or delineating recommended courses of action.

### **VIII. Thesis-Driven**

Academic writing is "thesis-driven," meaning that the starting point is a particular perspective, idea, or position applied to the chosen topic of investigation, such as, establishing, proving, or disproving solutions to the research questions posed for the topic. Note that a problem statement without the research questions does not qualify as academic writing because simply identifying the research problem does not establish for the reader how you will contribute to solving the problem, what aspects you believe are most critical, or suggest a method for gathering data to better understand the problem.

### **IX. Complexity and Higher-Order Thinking**

Academic writing addresses complex issues that require higher-order thinking skills applied to understanding the research problem [e.g., critical, reflective, logical, and creative thinking as opposed to, for example, descriptive or prescriptive thinking]. Higher-order thinking skills include cognitive processes that are used to comprehend, solve problems, and express concepts or that describe abstract ideas that cannot be easily acted out, pointed to, or shown with images. Think of your writing this way: One of the most important attributes of a good teacher is the ability to explain complexity in a way that is understandable and relatable to the topic being presented. This is also one of the main functions of academic writing--examining and explaining the significance of complex ideas as clearly as possible. As a writer, you must adopt the role of a good teacher by summarizing a lot of complex information into a well-organized synthesis of ideas, concepts, and recommendations that contribute to a better understanding of the research problem.

Strategies for...

## **Understanding Academic Writing and Its Jargon**

**The very definition of jargon is language specific to a particular subgroup of people.** Therefore, in modern university life, jargon represents the specific language and meaning assigned to words and phrases specific to a discipline or area of study. For example, the idea of being rational may hold the same general meaning in both political science and psychology, but its *application* to understanding and explaining phenomena within the research domain of each discipline may have subtle differences based upon how scholars in that discipline apply the concept to the theories and practice of their work.

Given this, **it is important that specialist terminology [i.e., jargon] must be used accurately and applied under the appropriate conditions.** Subject-specific dictionaries are the best places to confirm the meaning of terms within the context of a specific discipline. These can be found by either searching in the [USC Libraries catalog](#) by entering the disciplinary and the word dictionary [e.g., sociology and dictionary] or using a database such as [Credo Reference](#). It is appropriate for you to use specialist language within your field of study, but you should avoid using such language when writing for non-academic or general audiences.

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## **Problems with Opaque Writing**

It's not unheard of for scholars to utilize needlessly complex syntax or overly expansive vocabulary that is impenetrable or not well-defined. When writing, avoid problems associated with opaque writing by keeping in mind the following:

**1. Excessive use of specialized terminology.** Yes, it is appropriate for you to use specialist language and a formal style of expression in academic writing, but it does not mean using "big words" just for the sake of doing so. Overuse of complex or obscure words or writing complicated sentence constructions gives readers the impression that your paper is more about style than substance; it leads the reader to question if you really know what you are talking about. Focus on creating clear and elegant prose that minimizes reliance on specialized terminology.

**2. Inappropriate use of specialized terminology.** Because you are dealing with concepts, research, and data within your discipline, you need to use the technical language appropriate to that area of study. However, nothing will undermine the validity of your study quicker than the inappropriate application of a term or concept. Avoid using terms whose meaning you are unsure of--don't just guess or assume! Consult the meaning of terms in specialized, discipline-specific dictionaries by searching the USC Libraries catalog or reference database [see above].

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## **Additional Problems to Avoid**

**In addition to understanding the use of specialized language, there are other aspects of academic writing in the social sciences that you should be aware of. These problems include:**

- **Personal nouns.** Excessive use of personal nouns [e.g., I, me, you, us] may lead the reader to believe the study was overly subjective. These words can be interpreted as being used only to avoid presenting empirical evidence about the research problem. Limit the use of personal nouns to descriptions of things you actually did [e.g., "I interviewed ten teachers about classroom management techniques..."]. Note that personal nouns are generally found in the discussion section of a paper because this is where you as the author/researcher interpret and describe your work.
- **Directives.** Avoid directives that demand the reader to "do this" or "do that." Directives should be framed as evidence-based recommendations or goals leading to specific outcomes.
- **Informal, conversational tone using slang and idioms.** Academic writing relies on excellent grammar and precise word structure. Your narrative should not include regional dialects or slang terms because they can be open to interpretation; be direct and concise using standard English.
- **Wordiness.** Focus on being concise, straightforward, and developing a narrative that does not have confusing language. By doing so, you help eliminate the possibility of the reader misinterpreting the design and purpose of your study.
- **Vague expressions (e.g., "they," "we," "people," "the company," "that area," etc.).** Being concise in your writing also includes avoiding vague references to persons, places, or things. While proofreading your paper, be sure to look for and edit any vague or imprecise statements that lack context or specificity.
- **Numbered lists and bulleted items.** The use of bulleted items or lists should be used only if the narrative dictates a need for clarity. For example, it is fine to state, "The four main problems with hedge funds are:" and then list them as 1, 2, 3, 4. However, in academic writing, this must then be followed by detailed explanation and analysis of each item. Given this, the question you should ask yourself while proofreading is: why begin with a list in the first place rather than just starting with systematic analysis of each item arranged in separate paragraphs? Also, be careful using numbers because they can imply a ranked order of priority or importance. If none exists, use bullets and avoid checkmarks or other symbols.
- **Descriptive writing.** Describing a research problem is an important means of contextualizing a study. In fact, some description or background information may be needed because you can not assume the reader knows everything about the topic. However, the content of your paper should focus on methodology, the analysis and

interpretation of findings, and their implications as they apply to the research problem rather than background information and descriptions of tangential issues.

- **Personal experience.** Drawing upon personal experience [e.g., traveling abroad; caring for someone with Alzheimer's disease] can be an effective way of introducing the research problem or engaging your readers in understanding its significance. Use personal experience only as an example, though, because academic writing relies on evidence-based research. To do otherwise is simply storytelling.

**NOTE: Rules concerning excellent grammar and precise word structure do not apply when quoting someone.** A quote should be inserted in the text of your paper exactly as it was stated. If the quote is especially vague or hard to understand, consider paraphrasing it or using a different quote to convey the same meaning. Consider inserting the term "sic" in brackets after the quoted word or phrase to indicate that the quotation has been transcribed exactly as found in the original source, but the source has grammar, spelling, or other errors. The adverb sic informs the reader that the errors are not yours.

## Structure and Writing Style

### I. Improving Academic Writing

To improve your academic writing skills, you should focus your efforts on three key areas:

**1. Clear Writing.** The act of thinking about precedes the process of writing about. Good writers spend sufficient time distilling information and reviewing major points from the literature they have reviewed before creating their work. Writing detailed outlines can help you clearly organize your thoughts. Effective academic writing begins with solid planning, so manage your time carefully.

**2. Excellent Grammar.** Needless to say, English grammar can be difficult and complex; even the best scholars take many years before they have a command of the major points of good grammar. Take the time to learn the major and minor points of good grammar. Spend time practicing writing and seek detailed feedback from professors. Take advantage of the [Writing Center](#) on campus if you need help. Proper punctuation and good proofreading skills can significantly improve academic writing [see sub-tab for [proofreading your paper](#)].

**Refer to these three basic resources to help your grammar and writing skills:**

- A good writing reference book, such as, Strunk and White's book, [The Elements of Style](#) or the [St. Martin's Handbook](#);

- A college-level dictionary, such as, [Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary](#);
- The latest edition of [Roget's Thesaurus in Dictionary Form](#).

**3. Consistent Stylistic Approach.** Whether your professor expresses a preference to use MLA, APA or the *Chicago Manual of Style* or not, choose one style manual and stick to it. Each of these style manuals provide rules on how to write out numbers, references, citations, footnotes, and lists. Consistent adherence to a style of writing helps with the narrative flow of your paper and improves its readability. Note that some disciplines require a particular style [e.g., education uses APA] so as you write more papers within your major, your familiarity with it will improve.

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## II. Evaluating Quality of Writing

A useful approach for evaluating the quality of your academic writing is to consider the following issues from the perspective of the reader. While proofreading your final draft, critically assess the following elements in your writing.

- It is shaped around one clear research problem, and it explains what that problem is from the outset.
- Your paper tells the reader why the problem is important and why people should know about it.
- You have accurately and thoroughly informed the reader what has already been published about this problem or others related to it and noted important gaps in the research.
- You have provided evidence to support your argument that the reader finds convincing.
- The paper includes a description of how and why particular evidence was collected and analyzed, and why specific theoretical arguments or concepts were used.
- The paper is made up of paragraphs, each containing only one controlling idea.
- You indicate how each section of the paper addresses the research problem.
- You have considered counter-arguments or counter-examples where they are relevant.
- Arguments, evidence, and their significance have been presented in the conclusion.
- Limitations of your research have been explained as evidence of the potential need for further study.
- The narrative flows in a clear, accurate, and well-organized way.