

What Is 'Academic Writing'?

This handout has been retrieved from <http://www15.uta.fi/FAST/FIN/RESEARCH/acadwrit.html>. It has been adapted to meet the needs of the course.

What exactly is "academic writing"?

In brief, academic writing is 'structured research' written by 'scholars' for other scholars (with all university writers being 'scholars' in this context). Academic writing addresses topic-based 'research questions' of interest to anyone who is seeking factually-based, objectively-presented information on a particular topic. The objective of academic writing is the presentation of 'new knowledge' via (a) a review of *what is currently known about a given topic* as (b) the foundation for *the author's new views or perspectives on the topic*.

In the case of literature and/or civilization, the topics would all be relevant to literary, cultural, historical, or political issues in British or American studies. With the topic, students must define one or more "research questions" concerning the chosen issue that the paper will address. The resulting paper will help readers understand the topic more fully, or in a new way, on the basis of how the author has treated the topic, in particular through the answer(s) given to the research question(s).

Academic Writing vs Simple Description; 'What is Known' vs 'What May Be Thought' or 'Questioned'

In academic writing, the author covers the selected topic from an authoritative point of view. The writing is 'thesis-driven', meaning that the starting point is a particular perspective, idea or 'thesis' on the chosen topic, e.g. establishing, proving or disproving 'answers' to the 'research questions' posed for the topic. In contrast, simply describing a topic without the questions does **NOT** qualify as "academic writing."

Defining a research question requires the student to first consult existing information on the topic. After this, questions may arise, such as: Is it really this way? How or why did it get that way? Is it always this way? Does 'everyone' see it this way? Do newer sources agree with older ones on the topic? Or, to take another line of inquiry? e.g.: What influence did X have on Y (or, of what significance was it to Y)? Why was the influence this great (or not greater)?

The foundation of the research paper is the documented review of what is currently known about the topic. On this foundation the author constructs his/her perspective, e.g. how the topic may be understood more fully or differently from what is "currently known." The author's perspective may come from the use of (a) more extensive or (b) more up-to-date sources than had been available to previous scholars, or by (c) interpreting the details of these sources differently from how other scholars have done. Totally new information may also be created to 'test' or 'confirm' questions arising in the paper.

In short, academic papers distinguish between what is *known* about a topic (via the review of existing sources on the topic) with what new ideas may emerge, or be *thought* or *questioned* about the topic, via the explication of the research question using the author's logically-developed, factually-based 'argumentation'. However, these new ideas will only be established as "fact" in their own right — thus joining the body of 'existing knowledge on the topic' — after the ideas have been published [in the paper] and subsequently validated by other 'scholars'.

Stylistic Conventions of Academic Writing

The basic stylistic conventions of the a literature or civilization paper have to meet the MLA recommendations. The key points, which are common to any unambiguous formal writing for an international English-language audience, include:

1. Writing in the third person. Academic writing must be objective; the focus is not on the writer, but on the topic and ideas of the paper;
2. Avoiding abbreviations and slang, both of which may be highly culture-specific. The focus is clear, formal-register language which will be unambiguous regardless of the variety of English used by the paper's international readership. Similarly, one should also write out numbers, currency designators, units of measurement, etc., in full.

An additional characteristic of academic writing is the use of relatively cautious or 'qualified' language, especially when documenting claims of new knowledge. Inasmuch as the evidence of the paper can only be based on *what is currently known* about the topic, this evidence may well change as new knowledge emerges (indeed, the "new knowledge" proposed by *your paper* will change what has been known about the topic before you wrote your paper. Thus, since the 'knowledge' will never be completely certain, it is useful to express claims with language such as:

- This report *appears to show* that . . .
- But on page 357, X *seems to feel* differently . . .
- In this context, Y *apparently* disagrees with X . . .
- These two writers thus have views which differ from present textbooks on

Stages in the Writing of an Academic Paper

Common to all research papers is an elaboration of questions such as the following:

- What do I know about my topic?
- Can I answer the questions who, what, when, where, why, how?
- What do I know about the context of my topic?
- What historical or cultural influences do I know about that might be important to my topic?
- Does my topic belong to any particular genre or category of topics?
- What do I know about this genre?
- What seems important to me about this topic?
- If I were to summarize what I know about this topic, what points would I focus on?

- What points seem less important?
- Why do I think so?
- How does this topic relate to other things that I know?
- What do I know about the topic that might help my reader to understand it in new ways?

Sometimes it is useful to also reflect on the opposite perspective when thinking about how to address a particular topic:

- What DON'T I know about my topic?
- What do I need to know?
- How can I find out more?
- What do I think, and why do I think that?

As you consider the questions listed above you will discover that you are moving beyond what you *know* about a topic and are beginning to consider what you *think*, and/or additional knowledge that *could be thought*. In the process of thinking about your topic, your aim is to come up with a fresh observation. It is not enough just to summarize in a paper what is already known. You must also add something of your own.

However, "adding something of your own" is not just bringing personal associations, reactions, or experiences into the text. To create an informed argument, your writing must be analytical rather than personal, with all associations, reactions, and experiences framed in an objectively critical manner.

Choosing An Appropriate Topic

Students often find it difficult to define an appropriate topic, even if they have an idea of the general subject they wish to write about. When considering possible topics, it may help to ask yourself the following questions:

1. Have you formed a research question for which there can be an informed and useful answer? Can it be answered adequately within the length and time requirements of the paper? Or is it too broad?
2. If the question seems broad, how might it be narrowed?
3. Does your question address social, historical, or other contexts relevant to your topic, as well as what other scholars (including past student papers) have said about it?