

ACADEMIC WRITING CONVENTIONS

A guide to crafting academic writing

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1. Think about the Big Picture:

The format of the academic paper is **logical or linear**. So, the writer aims to connect all the ideas in the paper together to serve one particular purpose. The term “Academic writing” is a broad category that includes many genres of writing. These can look like argumentative papers, research papers, and analysis writing, and the conventions may differ slightly depending on what genre you’re working in. However, in all types of academic writing the **whole paper** serves one **main purpose** that you want to communicate to the reader.

How do you achieve this?

- Describe how the paper is organized in your introduction.
- Make sure that your paragraphs all support the main idea, thesis, or research topic.
- Use Scholarly sources and cite them with the proper conventions (see resource on format styles!).
- Make sure that your sentences and paragraphs don’t suddenly shift topics. Guide the reader through to each new idea.

2. Think about your Writing Tone, Language and Word Choice:

You want to present your writing with a tone or feeling of **professionalism or authority**. This creates trust with your reader when they feel from your tone and word choice that you understand and can **help guide the reader** on the topic.

How do you achieve this?

- Choose words that are clear, concise, and specific.
- Be aware of alternative meanings for words – chose the ones that communicate what you want most clearly.
- Use concrete, specific nouns and pronouns. Stay away from vague terms like “they” or “people”.
- Leave out conditional words like “probably, might, could,” as they take away from your authority.
- Avoid contractions like “can’t” or language that sounds casual or conversational.
- Present information from both sides of an issue fairly, but make sure that your position or main goal is **clear**.
- Use “neutral” language. (Instead of saying, “The dark is bad/evil/frightening” we would say, “The dark is the absence of light.” This is a fact-based statement that isn’t based on a biased opinion).

3. Utilize Correct Punctuation:

In academic conventions, the tone is formal. Make sure that you understand the basic punctuation rules as you begin writing for the college level. Punctuation should maintain the professional tone of the work.

How do you achieve this?

- Avoid punctuation that changes tone. Exclamation points have a “over-excited” tone that does not always sound professional.
- Commas are one of the most important and one of the most difficult grammar conventions. Spend some time researching comma usage. The two most common uses are: **to separate two complete sentences that are connected by an “and” or “but”** and **to mark an introduction phrase or clause**. For example: “However, I went to the store.” Or “Because I was tired, I went home.”
- For more complex forms of punctuation, like semi-colons or dashes, it is safest to omit them and split up your long sentences into smaller, shorter ones. Once you feel comfortable with the rules for complex punctuation, you may begin adding it into your writing.

4. Citations and Scholarship

Citations and scholarly sources are two ways that make academic writing stand out from other forms of writing. As part of the writing process, you are expected to collect sources from articles and journals to **support your points**. The goal is to utilize support from sources who are acknowledged as experts in their fields and give them credit for their scholarship.

How do you achieve this?

- Find sources from scholarly databases: [Google Scholar](#) and [The Olin Library](#) are two very good places to start. Note: it is often not recommended to use articles that have not been peer-reviewed for your research, however this is dependent on your particular field.
- Cite your sources! This includes in the body of the work either as a **parenthetical citation** (Rollins Writing Center) or as **foot/endnotes**. You will also need to provide a **Bibliography** or **Works Cited** list at the end of the document.
- Please ensure that you know the style that your discipline or professor prefers (MLA, APA, Chicago, etc.).
- You must **always** acknowledge someone else’s work if you use it. Two methods to utilize other scholarship include: **Quotes** and **Paraphrasing**.

5. Basing Writing on Evidence

One of the most important parts of academic writing is how you utilize your resources. They should be used as evidence. The idea of all of the steps so far is to prove your credibility as an academic writer. Using scholarly resources as a base of knowledge to support the specifics of your paper is key to creating credible academic writing.

How do you achieve this?

- Tie in the scholarship you find to help support your thoughts. This helps you remain objective. Key phrases might look like “Scholars agree that ____” or “experts in the field disagree on____”.
- You must be able to synthesize and summarize multiple scholarly articles. Ideally you **talk about multiple authors in one paragraph.**

6. Thesis Driven Writing

Many students believe that a thesis is only required in an argumentative format. However, a thesis is not simply an argument (though it can be). A thesis is the main idea or drive of the paper. For example in a research paper, the underlying thesis/argument is “this topic is important” or “we need to look at _x_ in order to improve _y_”. In simple terms, thesis driven writing is when you take a perspective, position, or key idea and apply it to a topic. All academic writing will have a thesis.

How do you achieve this?

- Craft a key idea, research question, or purpose that you want your **entire** document to have. Note: This is different from the topic. You can write many papers with many purposes about the beach, but each purpose is its own **thesis.**
- Remember that if you are using a “problem-solution” format, you must include the solution to have an academic thesis.
- You want to show in your introduction what you believe is critical about the topic—why your paper on the topic has an important perspective to consider.
- The rest of the paper, or the “body,” should tie back to this main purpose logically at every point.

Final Thoughts:

As a writer you want to think of yourself as teaching about your chosen topic. It is key for you to be able to explain complex ideas and concepts to people who might never have encountered the topic before. Each of the steps above will help you teach your topic to your readers as effectively as possible.

- 1) Thinking about the Big Picture allows you to imagine the topic as a whole as you want your readers to be able to see it when they finish reading your work.
- 2) Tone, Word Choice, and Language all help you to communicate clearly. Anything you can do to avoid confusing your readers along the way is key to good academic writing.
- 3) Using Correct Punctuation is also another way to help with clear communication. If a reader gets caught up in complex sentences with too many commas, some of the ideas you want to share might get lost.
- 4) Citations and Scholarship assist with credibility. In order to be a good teacher, your readers need to trust you as a credible resource on the topic. Proving that your writing is based in strong research will make you a credible writer. Citing correctly is one of the best ways to do this. (And it keeps you from any form of plagiarism).
- 5) Basing your writing on evidence from those sources will not just make your paper credible, but your argument, purpose, or idea more convincing to your reader.
- 6) Making sure to use a thesis goes back to the idea of having a Big Picture. Making sure that every part of your paper ties into a thesis will help you maintain a clear logical topic all the way through. This way your reader will find the information you are teaching them easier to follow.

These are only basic guidelines for crafting academic writing. Make sure that in-situation you are looking at the guidelines from professors, journals, or publishers that you are writing for. Every discipline or field has their own requirements and guidelines for things like citations update constantly. So, keep in mind that the style conventions may change depending on the expectations and methodologies of your field as well as your intended audience.

Resources like the [Rollins Tutoring and Writing Center](#) and the [Purdue OWL](#) are ideal for helping you over hurdles with academic writing as you progress with your degree work.

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