

Academic Writing Expectations



Successful college writing requires much more than fulfilling assignments and following grammar and mechanics rules. Your instructors will expect you to know how to research effectively, think critically, and present your ideas and findings clearly in well-written and well-organized papers. This handout summarizes a variety of writing conventions that may be unfamiliar to students, whether or not they completed secondary education in the U.S..

As a student in an academic institution you are expected to:

- **Move between social and academic writing.** Informal language used between friends and on social networking sites generally isn't appropriate in academic contexts. Be careful not to let slang and informal communication slip into your assignments.
- **Establish your authority.** You should assume your opinions count; draw conclusions based on thorough research and then offer those conclusions in a clear, straightforward way; and build your authority by citing the works of others.
- **Be direct.** Good academic writing prepares readers for what is coming next and identifies clear topics and transitions.
 - * State your main point (thesis) clearly and early on in the paper. When reviewing your draft, if you find a word or sentence that does not directly contribute to your main point, remove it.
 - * Avoid over qualifying or hedging. Instead of saying "*I suppose the research indicates...*," simply say, "*The research indicates...*"
 - * Look for euphemisms (mild expressions for things that are uncomfortable or impolite to talk about) and other vague phrases in your writing and change them to something clearer. Use precise language for even the most taboo topics. Instead of saying, "*She's not the tallest person I've ever met,*" you can more directly say, "*She's short,*" or even more specifically, "*She's five feet tall.*"
 - * Make transitions from point to point obvious and clear. The first sentence (topic sentence) of your paragraph should connect to the previous paragraph and then look forward to what's to come.
- **Follow a linear organizational structure.** Introductory paragraphs should include a **thesis**, and subsequent paragraphs should begin with **topic sentences**. Give readers clear signals, in the form of varied and effective sentences and smooth transitions, to help them follow your overall thread. At the paragraph level, each idea should be directly linked to the paragraph before it. Information in a previous sentence will become the start of a new sentence.
- **Use ample supporting evidence.** Demonstrate a clear specific point with good reasons, examples, illustrations, or other details. If you are writing a research paper, this evidence may come from outside sources (make sure you're citing **credible** sources, such as peer-reviewed journals, not random blogs or websites whose information may or may not be accurate). If you're writing a personal narrative, you will need to pull specific examples from your own life to illustrate a point.
- **Avoid plagiarism.** Your research paper is a collaboration between you and your sources. To be fair and ethical, you must acknowledge your debt to the writers and researchers whose ideas you've borrowed. If you have questions concerning plagiarism or proper citation, ask a writing assistant and see our handouts on the different citation styles.

SENTENCE LEVEL ISSUES

- **Use comprehensible vocabulary.** Do not use long, fancy words when small ones will do. Big words do not necessarily make your writing seem smarter; instead, they may cloud your meaning. Instead of, “*These tangential issues only obfuscate your intention,*” you could simply say, “*These unrelated issues hide your meaning.*”
- **Check for subject-verb agreement,** especially in long, complex sentences.
- **Eliminate vague pronouns.** Check to make sure that pronouns have a clear referent. Introduce the noun before using a pronoun. Instead of, “*She sent me three emails before my mother called to say Happy Birthday,*” say, “*My mother sent me three emails before she called to say Happy Birthday.*”
- **Avoid repetition.** Repetition, in terms of general ideas expressed or specific words used, will distract the reader from your essay, and make them concentrate more on the lack of variety than your message.

ADDITIONAL TIPS

Use neutral language: Regardless of your personal feelings toward a topic, academic audiences prefer precise, neutral descriptions to emotional language. Too much emotional language will undermine your authority and readers may conclude that you are unable to present information in a balanced, credible way.

For example: *King Henry VIII was a monster who ordered two of his six wives to be executed.*

Although many would agree with this statement, a more neutral and persuasive way of writing would be:

King Henry VIII ordered two of his six wives to be executed.

Avoid extremism: Frequent use of absolutes (*all, every, none, most, least, always, never, only, best, worst*) and superlatives (phrases ending in *-est*) will also undermine your authority. Extreme statements are hard to prove and will invite readers to interrogate the truth of your claims.

For example: *This is the hottest day of the entire summer.*

It would be more accurate to say: *This is one of the hottest days of the summer.*

Be reasonable: Academic writers often express their ideas with *medium certainty* to avoid absolutism and remain neutral. *Hedging* is a way to lessen the intensity of a phrase, or to protect a writer from making statements beyond their level of certainty. *Hedges* include words and phrases like *may, sometimes, and usually*.

For example: *Mammals give birth to their young.*

Because there are exceptions to this claim, it would be more appropriate to use a *hedge* and say:

Most mammals give birth to their young.

A Note for ESL Writers

American rhetorical conventions may differ greatly from conventions in your native language. American rhetoric values individual opinions, but also adheres to certain discourse traditions: appropriate voice, structure, style, and so on. Academic institutions expect writers to be direct and to avoid digressions and circular thinking. These values are relative and particular to American culture. There is no sense that any type of writing is better than any other, but, as a student entering a Western educational institution, you should be aware of the writing styles your institution deems acceptable.

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References: Lunsford, Andrea A., ed. *The St. Martin's Handbook: Seventh Edition*. Boston, New York: Bedford/ St. Martin's, 2011. Print.

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