

# Academic Skills Workshop

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## Handout 2: Academic Writing Style

There's no great mystique about an "academic writing style". The most important thing is to keep your writing clear and concise and make sure that you get your ideas over in a comprehensible form. It's clear expression of these ideas that will impress your tutor, not a string of long, inappropriate words found in your dictionary. A wide range of vocabulary is of course important, but you must use the right word, and shorter ones are often better than longer ones.

The most important thing to remember is generally to try to avoid every day, informal language, especially colloquial expressions and slang. Also, spoken language is naturally full of hesitations, repetitions, grammatical errors and unfinished ideas. In your writing, however, structure is much more important: sentences should be complete and ideas arranged into paragraphs or sections, and you should aim for perfection in your grammar and spelling. However, especially if English is not your first language, don't become too obsessed with this, to the point perhaps of copying word for word from your sources. What's important is that you clearly show your understanding of the subject and your ability to manipulate information to answer a specific question or complete a specific task, and as long as any grammar errors you make don't impede this, then it shouldn't be a problem.

Here are a few general points to remember when you are writing your assignments. As well as using appropriate language and aiming for 100% accuracy in your grammar and vocabulary, you should also remember that you're writing for someone else, and hence the importance of punctuation, sentences, paragraphs and overall structure, all of which help the reader.

### Informal English

Aspects of informal English to avoid

- don't (do not!) use contractions (e.g. it's, he'll, it'd etc.): always use the full form (it is/has, he will, it would/had).
- don't use colloquial language or slang (e.g. kid, a lot of/lots of, cool)
- always write as concisely as you can, with no irrelevant material or "waffle".
- generally avoid "phrasal verbs" (e.g. get off, get away with, put in etc.): instead, use one word equivalents.
- avoid common but vague words and phrases such as get, nice, thing. Your writing needs to be more precise.
- avoid overuse of brackets; don't use exclamation marks or dashes; avoid direct questions; don't use "etc.".
- always use capital letters appropriately and never use the type of language used in texting!

### Structure your writing carefully

- make sure you write in complete sentences;
- divide your writing up into paragraphs;
- use connecting words and phrases to make your writing explicit and easy to follow;
- check your grammar and spelling carefully. Make sure your word-processor is spell checking in UK English

### Paragraphs

A sentence isn't a paragraph, although looking at some essays I've marked (and failed) some students disagree. At the other extreme, I get a paragraph of 500 words that should have been broken up into six sentences (I'm not joking!). Remember that commas and full stops allow for a break in the reading of the text. If you become hypoxic reading one of your paragraphs aloud it's a clue that you need to restructure your sentence.

## What is a paragraph?

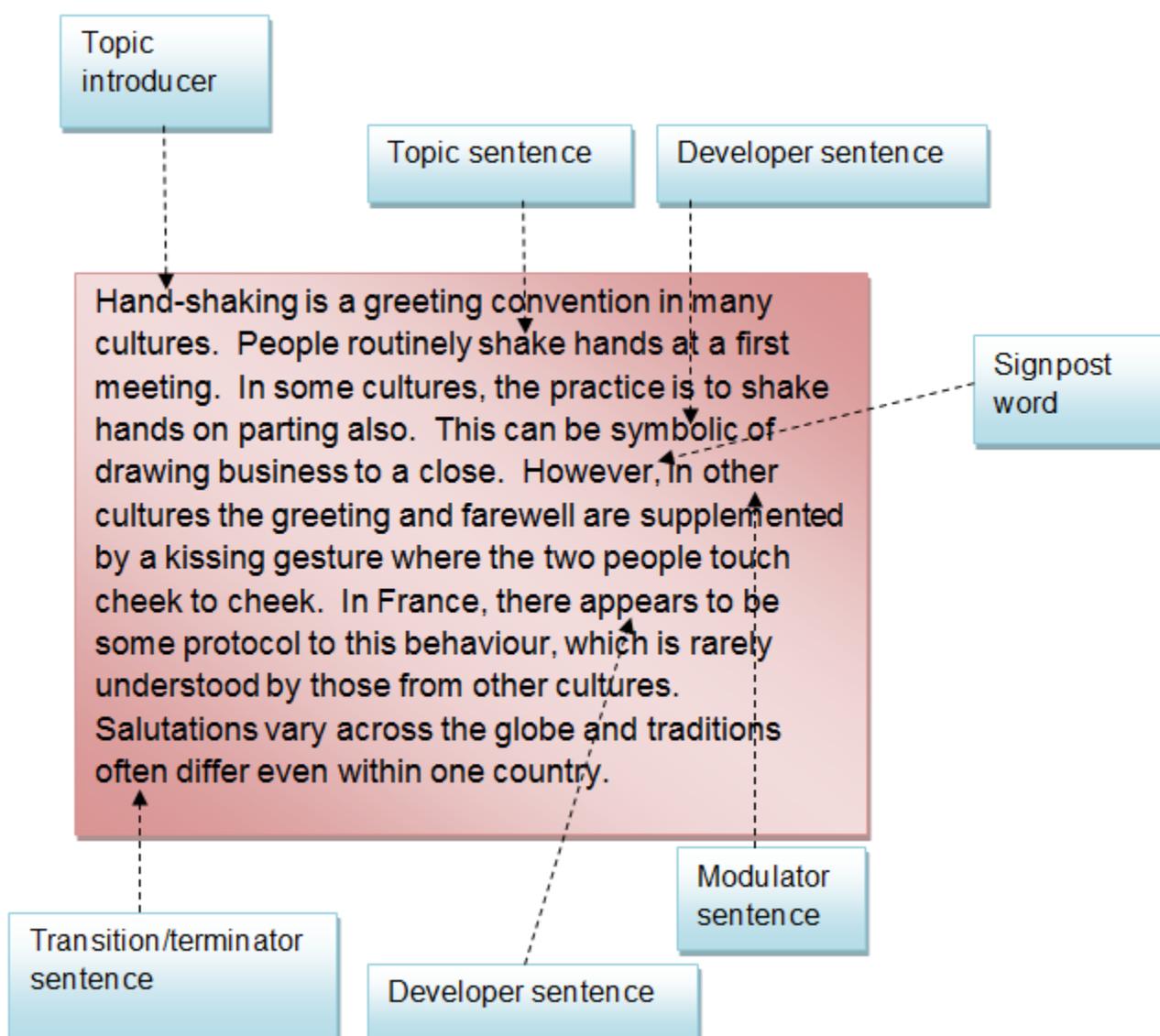
Paragraphs are the building blocks of an essay. Within each paragraph are sentences that perform different roles.

Each paragraph in the body of the essay should contain:

1. a topic sentence (or main idea sentence) that states your point;
2. an explanation of the point you're making; and
3. evidence. Most of the time, your point should be supported by some form of evidence from your reading, or by an example drawn from the subject area.

Don't just leave the evidence hanging there, you will need to analyse it! Comment on the implication/significance/impact and finish off the paragraph with a critical conclusion you have drawn from the evidence.

The example below demonstrates how different sentences are used to make up a paragraph.



## Different Sentences

Type of sentence	Role within the paragraph
Topic introducer sentence	Introduces the overall topic of the text (generally in the first paragraph)
Topic sentence	Introduces a paragraph by identifying the topic of that paragraph
Developer sentence	Expands the topic by giving additional information
Modulator sentence	Acts as a linking sentence and is often introduced by a signpost word moving to another aspect of the topic within the same paragraph
Transition/Terminator	Concludes the discussion of a topic within a paragraph, but can also be used as a transition sentence where it provides a link to the topic of the next paragraph

## Linking words / Signposts

A good paragraph will require signposts, or linking words that you can use to join component sentences together. This will make your text flow together more smoothly. The table below provides some useful examples.

### Linking Words / Signposts

Cause/effect	Comparison	Contrast	Addition	Examples	Conclusion	Time
whenever	likewise	although/but	also	for example	accordingly	as soon as
as/as a result	similarly	alternatively	and/and then	for instance	in brief	at the same time
because	equally	besides/despite	in addition	in other words	in short	as long as
consequently	as with	however/yet	moreover	in effect	in conclusion	at length/at last
hence	compared to	nevertheless	too	in this case	on the whole	meanwhile
since	equivalent to	on the other hand	further	in particular	to sum up	secondly/once
so		on the contrary	furthermore	specifically	throughout	first of all/first(ly)
thus		whereas	again	such as	in all	finally/eventually
therefore		while/whilst	the following	in the case of	overall	initially/next
accordingly		in contrast	what is more	to show that	in summary	after(wards)
until		otherwise	as well as	significantly	to conclude	subsequently
		conversely				henceforth

## Make your writing formal and impersonal

Avoid the use of personal language (I, my, we etc.). You should check if personal or third person should be used. Generally:

- Reflective journals use first person "As I approached the scene of the collision I could tell that the amount of damage was due to a high-speed impact. Mentally, I prepared to deal with ..." In this case the use of 'I' and 'We' is acceptable.
- Assignments should use third person "Paramedics approaching the scene of a collision should note the nature of the damage to vehicles and property as this may give an indication of the types of injury sustained by vehicles' occupants".

Watch the language that you use:

- Never use emotive language; be objective rather than subjective.
- Avoid being too dogmatic and making sweeping generalisations. It is usually best to use some sort of "hedging" language (see below) and to qualify statements that you make.
- you should consistently use evidence from your source reading to back up what you are saying and reference this correctly.
- avoid sexist language, such as chairman, mankind. Don't refer to "the doctor" as he; instead, make the subject plural and refer to them as they. Avoid he/she, herself/himself etc.
- use nominalisation; that is, try to write noun-based phrases rather than verb-based ones.

For example, instead of

**"Crime was increasing rapidly and the police were becoming concerned."**

Write:

**"The rapid increase in crime was causing concern among the police."**

In general, academic writing tends to be fairly dense, with relatively long sentences and wide use of subordinate clauses. Remember, however, that your main aim is clarity, so don't be too ambitious, particularly when you're starting to write.

## Hedging / Avoiding commitment

In order to put some distance between what you're writing and yourself as writer, and to be cautious rather than assertive, you should:

- Avoid overuse of first person pronouns (I, we, my, our)
- Use impersonal subjects instead (It is believed that ..., it can be argued that ...)
- Use passive verbs to avoid stating the 'doer' (Tests have been conducted)
- Use verbs (often with it as subject) such as imagine, suggest, claim, suppose
- Use 'attitudinal signals' such as apparently, arguably, ideally, strangely, unexpectedly.

These words allow you to hint at your attitude to something without using personal language.

- use verbs such as *would*, *could*, *may*, *might* which 'soften' what you're saying.
- use qualifying adverbs such as *some*, *several*, *a minority of*, *a few*, *many* to avoid making over-generalisations.

## Using Quotations

Sometimes when you read an article, you find a useful quote that supports a point that you want to emphasise, and you want to add this to your work.

Don't go and put very big quotations into your work. Quotations are usually short (up to two lines) or long (more than two lines). Generally speaking, more than six lines is too big as it presents too much of someone else's work. You must also include a reference, which gives the page number on which the quotation may be found.

#### **For short quotations:**

Quotations of up to two lines in length can be included in the body of your text and are shown by using double quotation marks (") around the text e.g. Plagiarism can be defined as "passing off someone else's work, whether intentionally or unintentionally, as your own for your own benefit" (Carroll, 2002 p.9).

#### **For long quotations:**

Quotations should be indented, with a blank line above and below, and in a new paragraph – they do not need quotation marks e.g.

If there's unanimity about any aspect of the Information Age economy, it's that you have a better chance of getting a gold watch from a street vendor than you do from a corporation (Stewart, 1997 p.136).

#### **For quotations within quotations:**

Quotations within quotations need to be in double quotation marks (") in short quotations and in single quotation marks (') in long quotations e.g. Mrs Gorse replies that 'Master Miles only said "We must do nothing but what she likes!"'

#### **Shortening quotations**

You do not need to include the entire quotation, if it is not relevant or does not fit your sentence. Nor do you need to quote whole sentences, but can incorporate sections into your own sentence (as long as you make it fit grammatically).

However, if you alter a quotation otherwise, you should make this clear to the reader, and ensure that your changes do not alter the meaning. If you have left out a section, because it is not relevant to your point, then indicate this with three full stops in square brackets.

Smith summarises this view: "the novel is a significant [...] landmark in eighteenth century literature" (Smith, 2003 p.47).

You can also use square brackets to indicate where you have had to change a quotation slightly to make it fit in your own sentence.

Smith's view of this text is true of all texts of the period; they provide "fascinating record[s] of the tastes of a generation" (Smith, 2003 p.47).

**Reminder: To assist you when you run your work through Turnitin, Double quotation marks (") are recommended.**

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