



Developing Academic Style

Your students, in their writing, need to develop an academic writing style that is appropriate for their discipline. Student writing can suffer from being too conversational, from poor expression, and from a student's unawareness of academic writing conventions. Their teachers can have expectations about:

- the level of formality required (e.g. is it acceptable to use first-person pronouns such as "I" or "we"?)
- discipline-specific discourse conventions—an engineer will write differently from a historian. Students may write in an academic style, but it may not be appropriate to their discipline.
- genres or text types e.g. essays versus reports
- the use of sub-headings
- whether bullet points are expected or unacceptable.

Your discipline determines your writing style

The following table briefly lists the key elements of a range of disciplines that might affect the way students are expected to write in their assignments.

Elements	Sciences	Humanities	Social Sciences
Examples of discipline areas	Physics, biology, geology, botany, chemistry	Literature, art, history, philosophy, psychology	Sociology, education, law, management, planning
Purpose	To describe, classify, and explain the physical world	To provide deeper layers of understanding of objects under study and to explore the world of human experiences	To explain the social world
Epistemological cultures	Emphasis on clarity of criteria, universality of laws, validity and consistency	Personal interpretations and perspective on the object under study	Roots derive from moral philosophy and the discovery of physical sciences. Represented through models, frameworks, protocols
Knowledge growth	Cumulative. Members share a uniform knowledge framework	Meanders and evolves. Concerned with particulars. Diversity of criteria. Methodological frameworks are not strongly emphasised	Causality is important and knowledge is open to scrutiny and appraisal. Common ground with reader has to be established

Evidence	Observations are highly valued	Evidence from object under study and author's perspective is highly valued	Theoretical frameworks v
Genres	Reports and explanations	Retelling and narrative	Exposition with strong justification and appraisal
Argument	Analytical. Builds on existing knowledge and therefore predominantly maintains status quo	Complex reasoning and judgement. Common ground established through contextualisation. Narrative builds details Argues to change the status quo	Appraisal and justification establish and develop author's perspective. Strong and fr references to theory
Language characteristics	Technical and abstract. Taxonomies and classifications	Abstract and metaphorical.	Technical, abstract and metaphorical
Citations	Knowledge focus. Very few negative references. Quotations are rare.	Citations are explicit and degree of positive or negative appraisal of the literature varies depending on the field.	Strong focus on positive or negative appraisal of author. Authors are invoked or cited as part of the argument.

(Source: Jenny Pittman (1999). What Difference does a Discipline Make? *Proceedings of the National Language and Academic Skills Conference*, Monash University, 25–26 November.)

Strategies

With all those disciplinary variations in mind, how can you encourage your students to write in an appropriate academic style for your discipline? And how can you incorporate this encouragement into your teaching without significantly increasing your workload?

- First, clarify your own thoughts about what you mean by academic style in your discipline. Reflect on how you acquired the accepted writing style of your discipline. Remember, it probably didn't happen overnight. How did you develop your style? How long did the process take? What kind of academic writing is valued in your discipline? Communicate this to your students early in the course.
- Does your School have clear guidelines on appropriate formats and language style for assignments? Are there authentic student model assignments/examples for students to consult? Circulate them or direct your students to them.
- Provide authentic examples of appropriate academic style from within your discipline. Ask your colleagues for examples of good student assignments that demonstrate an appropriate style. With the permission of the authors, and taking suitable measures to protect their anonymity, use them to explain to your students what you require in written assignments.
- Provide—or encourage students to develop, as part of an online course—a glossary of discipline-specific terms that the students should understand and be able to use correctly by the end of the course. You might also want to recommend the use of discipline-specific dictionaries.

- Discuss academic style in lectures and tutorials. Tell students how to use their writing to show that they are members of the academic community and their particular discipline; discuss the use of appropriate genres and the level of formality you expect.
- Early in the course, as part of a lecture, tutorial or other lesson, analyse an example of inappropriate academic writing style. Explain and discuss why it is inappropriate to the discipline, or in a higher education context. Ask the students to rewrite it in a more appropriate style, either in class or for homework. Have them submit it, and give them feedback on how competently they have completed the task.
- Throughout the course, encourage students to give feedback in groups on draft assignments, focusing specifically on aspects of writing style as well as on content.

Case Study

A UNSW case study about developing academic writing style in Law.

Further reading

Ruth Neumann and Tony Becher (2002). Teaching and learning in their disciplinary contexts *Studies in higher education* 27(4), 405–417.

Jenny Pittman and Nollie Nahrung (2009). Introduction to Study and Writing Skills. Graduate School of Management, Southern Cross University.

Michelle Holschuh Simmons (2005). Librarians as Disciplinary Discourse Mediators: Using Genre Theory to Move Toward Critical Information Literacy. *Libraries and the Academy* 5(3), 297–311.

UNSW Support for Writing Laboratory Reports

UNSW Writing Skills Support

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