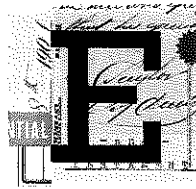


## FOUR

# Meeting the Expectations of Academic Writing

"It's Like Learning a New Language"



ELLEN MACNAMARA ARRIVED AT COLLEGE excited but also anxious. She had grown up in a small town far from the college, had not taken calculus, and had never written more than a five-paragraph essay. So when she got her first college writing assignment—in a political science class, to write a ten-page essay on how the relationship among the three branches of the US government has evolved—she felt a little panic. She had read all her assignments and done some research, and she had even met with her instructor during office hours. She had quite a bit of material. But her first attempts at writing just didn't sound right. She wasn't sure what college writing sounded like, but this wasn't it.

Following her instructor's advice, MacNamara studied several of the political science articles on her course reading list. Compared to her usual writing, they were much more formal, full of complicated sentences. What she eventually came up with wasn't a particularly good essay (and she knew it), but it served its purpose: it had gotten her thinking about college-level writing. Looking back at the work she had done to get this far, she thought, "Wow, this is almost like learning a new language."

MacNamara had a point. Many students have experiences similar to hers, especially multilingual students who've grown up in other cultures. One Romanian student we know put it this way:

In my country we care very much about the beauty of what we write. Even with academic and business writing, we try to make our texts poetic in some way. When I got to the U.S.A., I discovered that writing that I thought was beautiful struck my teachers as wordy and off-task. I was surprised about this.

This student, like Ellen MacNamara, needed to set about learning a new language—in this case, the language of US academic writing.

### Habits of Mind for Academic Success

Learning the language of US academic writing is key to succeeding in college. Luckily, you don't need to guess at what strategies will lead to success. In *Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing*, researchers and scholars have identified several key habits characteristic of students who do well in college—and beyond. Practice these habits in your coursework and you'll be "approaching learning from an active stance." In other words, you'll be on the path to succeed as an active, engaged writer and thinker.


- *Be curious.* Inquire, investigate, poke and pry until you find answers to questions you have or until you discover or create something new. Without curiosity, you'll miss much of what is really going on around you—in the courses you take and the sources you read. You can practice curiosity by asking questions: Why are the dorms on your campus so far away from the academic buildings? Who makes such decisions? How does the distance affect students who don't have bikes, for instance, or those with physical disabilities?
- *Be open & flexible.* Look at all sides of an issue. Consider fairly ideas that at first seem strange, foreign, or incorrect. Don't simply gather sources that agree with your position; instead, look for opposing views. And don't accept easy answers or those that occur to you first. In a discussion about campus safety, for example, listen and try to put yourself in the position of people with different perspectives—perhaps a young woman visitor, an older faculty member, or a student who works in a lab late at night.
- *Be engaged.* Grapple with the ideas of others, responding to them and finding connections between them. And don't give in to boredom—seek

out something that really interests you in each course and assignment. A student we know was taking a course on ancient religious texts, primarily to fulfill a requirement, but when he read the Samson and Delilah story in different traditions, he used his interest in comics to create a graphic narrative of his favorite version. A topic that didn't draw him in at first became one he was excited about.

- *Be creative.* Try a new method or approach. Use a different medium for representing an idea. Take a risk investigating an idea or topic outside your comfort zone. If you think for a minute or two about your most successful school endeavors, you'll probably find that creativity played an important role: that geology project you created and presented that was unlike anything anyone else had done; the decision you made to create hip-hop lyrics to illustrate a point in a history essay.
- *Be persistent.* Keep at it. Follow through. Take advantage of opportunities to redo and improve. Keep track of what's challenging or hard for you—and look for ways to overcome those specific obstacles. You've probably already seen the positive effects of persistence in your life: they will count double (or triple) in college. Successful students don't give up but keep on keeping on. A student searching for information on a distant relative who had played a role in the civil rights movement kept coming up empty-handed and was about to give up on the project. But she decided to try one last lead on an ancestry website—and came up with a crucial piece of information that led to a big breakthrough and a sense of personal satisfaction. Persistence pays off!
- *Be responsible.* You're in control of your own learning—own it. Hold yourself responsible for making the most of your education. And be a responsible participant in the academic conversation by both incorporating and acknowledging the words and ideas of others in your own work.
- *Think about your own thinking.* Reflect on how you learn and think—and develop a habit of doing so often. Several major studies identify this kind of purposeful reflection as instrumental to becoming well educated. Many students find that keeping an informal journal to write about what they are learning, how they are learning it, and how they are learning to overcome obstacles leads to better comprehension and better success.

It's no coincidence that these habits of mind overlap with what it means to think and act rhetorically. The same practices that make us careful,

ethical, and effective communicators (listen, search for understanding, put in your oar) also lead to success in college. You'll have opportunities to practice and develop these habits in your college writing. And doing so means you'll be well on your way to learning the "new language" of academic writing Ellen MacNamara described.

 **REFLECT.** *Think about a writing task you've recently been assigned or you're working on now. Which of the habits of mind have you used? And which ones are missing? Which habits of mind seem to come most naturally to you and which do you need to develop? Is there a habit you could put to better use? How will you do so next time?*

### So Just What Is Edited Academic Writing?

Academic writing is the kind of writing you do for school (and sometimes for work). It follows a set of conventions, such as using fairly formal edited English, following patterns of organization, and providing support for the points you make. But academic writing is also rather flexible, reaching beyond the classroom: it's used in many journals, newspapers, and books as well as online, especially on sites that address serious topics like politics, research, or cultural analysis. So "academic writing" is a broad category, one flexible enough to accommodate differences across disciplines, for example, while still remaining recognizably "academic." This chapter considers some of the assumptions that lie behind academic writing in the United States and describes some of the most common characteristics of that writing.

We're giving so much attention to academic writing for a couple of important reasons. First, becoming fluent in it will be of great help to you both in college and well beyond; and second, it poses challenges to both native and nonnative speakers of English. We want to acknowledge these challenges without making them seem difficult to overcome. Instead, we want to demystify some of the assumptions and conventions of academic writing and get you started thinking about how to use them to your advantage.

Though edited academic English is used in most academic and professional situations in the United States, the multilingual nature of our society often leads writers to bring other dialects of English and other languages

Tressie McMillan  
Cottom opens  
her essay with  
a startling  
statement made  
in a nonacademic  
variety of English.  
Check out how  
effective her  
opening is  
on p. 975.

into their writing and to take what Professors Jerry Won Lee and Christopher Jenks refer to as “translingual dispositions.” This term refers to a pretty simple concept: those who adopt such a way of thinking are open and receptive to language differences, including differences among varieties of any language. Taking such a flexible approach to language difference is now characteristic of many college writing programs as well as much of the best writing occurring today. This mindset recognizes that there’s usually more than one effective way to say or write something. And while edited academic English is one way (and a very common one in academic writing), it’s not objectively better or worse than other ways. Ultimately, your audience and purpose should always inform your language choices.

### Joining US Academic Conversations

If you are new to college, you’ll want to learn to “talk the talk” of academic writing so that you can join the conversations in progress all around you. Doing so calls for understanding some common expectations that most of your instructors likely hold.

**You’re expected to respond.** One important assumption underlying the kind of writing expected in American colleges is that reading and writing are active processes in which students not only absorb information but also respond to and even question it. Not all educational systems view reading and writing in this way. In some cultures, students are penalized if they attempt to read established texts critically or disagree with authorities or insert their own views. If you are from such a background, you may find it difficult to engage in this kind of active reading and writing. It may feel rude, disrespectful, or risky, particularly if you would be reprimanded for such engagement in your home culture.

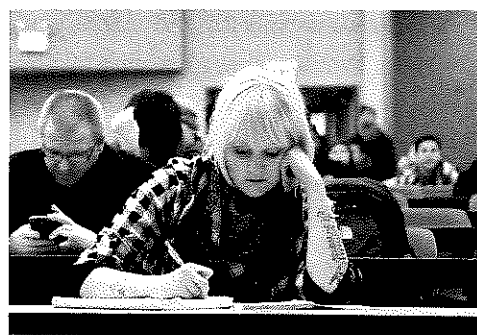
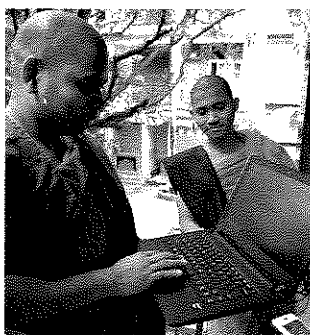
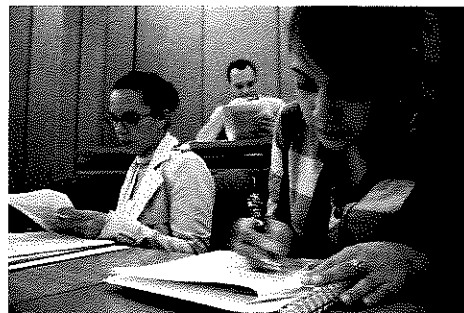
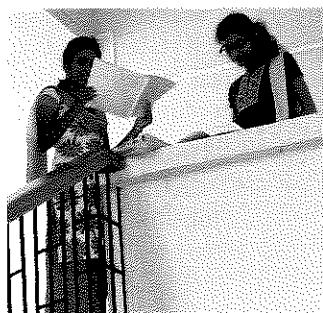
Remember, however, that the kind of engagement your instructors want is not hostile or combative; it’s not about showing off by beating down the ideas of others. Rather, they expect you to demonstrate your active engagement with the texts you read—and an awareness that in doing so you are joining an academic conversation, one that has been going on for a long time and that will continue. It’s fine to express strong opinions, but it’s also important to remember—and acknowledge—that there is value in perspectives other than your own.

You're expected to ask questions. Because US culture emphasizes individual achievement, students are expected to develop authority and independence, often by asking questions. In contrast to cultures where the best students never ask questions because they have already studied the material and worked hard to learn it, students in American academic contexts are expected and encouraged to voice their questions. In other words, don't assume you have to figure everything out by yourself. Do take responsibility for your own learning whenever possible, but it's fine to ask questions about what you don't understand, especially specific assignments.

You're expected to say what you think. American instructors expect that students will progress from relying on the thoughts of others to formulating ideas and arguments of their own. One important way to make that move is to engage in dialogue with other students and teachers. In these dialogues, teachers are not looking for you to express the "right" position; instead, they're looking for you to say what you think and provide adequate and appropriate support for that point of view.

You're expected to focus from the start. In contrast to many cultures, where writers start with fairly general background information, American academic writing immediately focuses in on the topic at hand. Thus, even in the introduction of an essay, you begin at a relatively focused level, providing even greater detail in the paragraphs that follow. The point is not to show how much you know but instead to provide the information your audience needs to understand the point easily.

Because American academic writers generally open their discussions at a fairly specific level, you wouldn't want to begin with a sentence like "All over the world and in many places, there are families," a thesis statement in an essay one of us once received from a native speaker of Arabic. (Translated into Arabic, this would make a beautiful sentence and an appropriate opening statement for an essay.) Students educated in Spanish or Portuguese and, to an even greater extent, those educated in Arabic are accustomed to providing a great deal more background information than those educated in English. If you are from one of these cultural backgrounds, do not be surprised if your instructor encourages you to delete most of the first few pages of a draft, for example, and to begin instead by addressing your topic more directly and specifically.



Academic writers at work in (clockwise from top left) India, Chile, Burkina Faso, the United States, Thailand, and Italy.

You're expected to state your point explicitly. In US academic English, writers are usually expected to provide direct and explicit statements that lead readers, step by step, through the text—in contrast to cultures that value indirectness, circling around the topic rather than addressing it head-on. A Brazilian student we knew wasn't inclined to state the point of an essay up front and explicitly. From his cultural perspective, it made more sense to develop an argument by building suspense and stating his position only at the end of the essay. As he said, "It took a lot of practice for me to learn how to write the very direct way that professors in the USA want."

All these expectations suggest that American academic discourse puts much of the burden for successful communication on the author rather than on members of the audience. So with these expectations in mind, let's take a close look at eight common characteristics of US academic writing.

### CHARACTERISTIC FEATURES

No list of characteristics can describe all the kinds of texts you'll be expected to write in college, particularly given the differences among disciplines. But there are certain things you're expected to do in college writing:

- Use edited academic English.
- Use clear and recognizable patterns of organization.
- Mark logical relationships between ideas.
- State claims explicitly and provide appropriate support.
- Present your ideas as a response to others.
- Express your ideas clearly and directly.
- Be aware of how genres and conventions vary across disciplines.
- Document sources using the appropriate citation style.

#### Use Edited Academic English

Academic writing usually follows the conventions of **EDITED ACADEMIC ENGLISH** in terms of spelling, grammar, and punctuation. In addition, it is often more rather than less formal. Thus, the kinds of abbreviations and



other shortcuts you use while texting or posting to social media usually aren't appropriate in academic writing: you'll have to write out "in my opinion" rather than "IMHO," and you'll also want to avoid emojis. Likewise, slang isn't usually appropriate. In some contexts, you'll discover that even contractions aren't appropriate—although we use them in this book because we're aiming for a conversational tone, one that is formal to some degree but not stuffy.

Thinking about the term itself—edited academic English—will give you some insights into the goal you are trying to accomplish. In general, this **DIALECT** of language, like its counterpart in many other cultures, is the one used in formal contexts, including academic ones, by educated people.

There is a logic behind using such an academic dialect: if everyone can agree on and follow the same basic conventions, whether for spelling or subject-verb agreement, we should all be able to communicate successfully with a broad range of people. It's helpful but not perfect, since as you know if you have been to Canada or the United Kingdom or Australia, academic English varies from country to country. *Edited* reminds you that this variety of English is one that has been looked at very carefully. Most writers, especially those who grew up speaking other varieties of English and those whose first language is not English, re-read their writing several times with great care. This is also, of course, the role that good editors play: they read someone else's work and make suggestions about how to improve the quality, whether at the level of the sentence, the paragraph, or the text as a whole. Few of us pay such careful attention to our writing when we tweet or text—but we *all* need to do so with our academic writing, even if it's in the form of email.

### Use Clear and Recognizable Patterns of Organization

Academic writing is often organized in a way that's clear and easy for readers to recognize. In fact, writers generally describe the pattern explicitly early in a text by including a **THESIS** sentence that states the main point and says how the text is structured.

At the paragraph level, the opening sentence generally serves as a **TOPIC SENTENCE**, which announces what the paragraph is about. Readers of academic writing expect such signals for the text as a whole and within each paragraph, even in shorter texts like essay exams. Sometimes you'll want to include headings to make it easy for readers to locate sections of text.

Readers of academic writing look for organization not only to be clear but also to follow some kind of logical progression. For example:

- Beginning with the simplest ideas and then moving step by step to the most complex ideas
- Starting with the weakest claims or evidence and progressing to the strongest ones
- Treating some topics early in the text because readers must have them as background to understand ideas introduced later
- Arranging the text chronologically, starting with the earliest events and ending with the latest ones

Some academic documents in the sciences and social sciences require a specific organization known as **IMRAD** for its specific headings: introduction, methods, results, and discussion. Although there are many possible logical patterns to use, readers will expect to be able to see that pattern with little or no difficulty. Likewise, they generally expect the **TRANSITIONS** between sections and ideas to be indicated in some way, whether with words like *first*, *next*, or *finally*, or even with full sentences like "Having considered three reasons to support this position, I will now present some alternative positions."

Finally, remember that you need to conclude your text by somehow reminding your readers of the main point(s) you want them to take away. Often, these reminders explicitly link the conclusion back to the thesis statement or introduction.

### Mark Logical Relationships between Ideas

Academic writers usually strive to make clear how the ideas they present relate to one another. Thus, in addition to marking the structure of the text, you need to mark the links between ideas and to do so explicitly. If you say in casual conversation, "It was raining, and we didn't go on the picnic," listeners will interpret *and* to mean *so* or *therefore*. In academic writing, however, you have to help readers understand how your ideas are related to one another. For this reason, you'll want to use **TRANSITIONS** like *therefore*, *however*, or *in addition*. Marking the relationships among your ideas clearly and explicitly helps readers recognize and appreciate the logic of your arguments.

### State Claims Explicitly and Provide Appropriate Support

One of the most important conventions of academic writing is to present **CLAIMS** explicitly and support them with **EVIDENCE**, such as examples or statistics, or by citing authorities of various kinds. Notice the two distinct parts: presenting claims clearly and supporting them appropriately. In academic writing, authors don't generally give hints; instead, they state what is on their minds, often in a **THESIS** statement. If you are from a culture that values indirection and communicates by hinting or by repeating proverbs or telling stories to make a point, you'll need to check to be sure that you have stated your claims explicitly. Don't assume that readers will be able to understand what you're saying, especially if they do not have the same cultural background knowledge that you do.

Qualify your statements. Note that being clear and explicit doesn't mean being dogmatic or closed-minded. You'll generally want to moderate your claims by using qualifying words like *frequently*, *often*, *generally*, *sometimes*, or *rarely* to indicate how strong a claim you are making. Note as well that it is much easier to provide adequate support for a qualified claim than it is to provide support for a broad unqualified claim.

Choose evidence your audience will trust. Whatever your claim, you'll need to use **EVIDENCE** that will be considered trustworthy and persuasive by your audience. And keep in mind that what counts as acceptable and appropriate evidence in academic writing often differs from what works in other contexts. Generally, for example, you wouldn't cite sacred religious texts as a primary source for academic arguments. In addition, writers today need more than ever to act as fact-checkers, making certain that their sources are accurate and credible rather than based on misinformation or lies.

Consider multiple perspectives. You should be aware that your readers may have a range of opinions on any topic, and you should write accordingly. Thus, citing only sources that reflect one perspective won't be sufficient in most academic contexts. Be sure to consider and acknowledge **COUNTER-ARGUMENTS** and viewpoints other than your own.

Organize information strategically. One common way of supporting a claim is by moving from a general statement to more specific information.

When you see words like *for example* or *for instance*, the author is moving from a more general statement to a more specific example.

In considering what kind of evidence to use in supporting your claims, remember that the goal is not to amass and present large quantities of evidence but instead to sift through all the available evidence, choose the evidence that will be most persuasive to your audience, and arrange and present it all strategically. Resist the temptation to include information or **ANECDOTES** that do not contribute to your argument. Your instructor may see these as digressions and encourage you to delete them.

### Present Your Ideas as a Response to Others

Strong academic writers do more than just make well-supported claims. They present their ideas as a response to what else has been said (or might be said) about their topic. One common pattern, introduced by professors Gerald Graff and Cathy Birkenstein, is to start with what others are saying and then to present your ideas as a response. If, as noted earlier in this chapter, academic writing is a way of entering a conversation—of engaging with the ideas of others—you need to include their ideas with your own.

Gerald Graff himself provides a good example, on p. 929, of beginning with another's idea and then responding with his own.

In fact, providing support for your claims will often involve **SYNTHESIS**: weaving the ideas and even the words of others into the argument you are making. And since academic arguments are part of a larger conversation, all of us are always responding to and borrowing from others, even as we are developing our own individual ideas.

### Express Your Ideas Clearly and Directly

Another characteristic of academic writing is clarity. You want to be sure that readers can understand exactly what you are writing about. Have you ever begun a sentence by writing "This shows . . ." only to have your teacher ask, "What does this refer to?" Such a comment is evidence that the reader isn't sure what the author—you—is referring to: this argument? this evidence? this analysis? Be specific in your language. You'll also want to **DEFINE** terms you use, both to be sure readers will not be confused and to clarify your own positions—much as we defined "edited academic English" earlier in this chapter.

Clarity of expression in academic writing also means being direct and concise. Academic writers in the United States avoid highly elaborate

sentence structures or flowery language, and they don't let the metaphors and similes they use get the best of them either, as this author did:

Cheryl's mind turned like the vanes of a wind-powered turbine, chopping her sparrowlike thoughts into bloody pieces that fell onto a growing pile of forgotten memories.

In fact, this sentence was the winner of an annual "bad writing" contest in which writers try to write the worst sentence they can. It's easy to see why this one was a winner: it has way too much figurative language—chopping wind turbines, bleeding sparrows, thoughts in a pile, forgotten memories—and the metaphors get in the way of one another. Use metaphors carefully in academic writing, making sure they add to what you're trying to say. Here's one way the prize-winning sentence might be revised to be clearer and more direct: "Cheryl's mind worked incessantly, thought after thought piling up until she couldn't keep track of them all."

### Be Aware of How Genres and Conventions Vary across Disciplines

While we can identify common characteristics of all academic writing, some genres and conventions vary across disciplines. Thus, an analytic essay in psychology is similar to one in a literature class, but it is also different in crucial ways. The same will be true for lab reports or position papers in various fields. In this regard, different disciplines are like different cultures, sharing many things but unique in specific ways. Therefore, part of becoming a biologist or an engineer—or even an electrical engineer instead of a civil engineer—is learning the discipline's particular rules and rituals as well as its preferred ways of presenting, organizing, and documenting information.

You'll also find that some rhetorical moves vary across genres. In the humanities, for example, writers often use a quotation to open an essay, as a way of launching an argument—or to close one, as a way of inspiring the audience. Such a move occurs far less often in the sciences or social sciences.

Despite these differences in genres across academic disciplines, you'll also find there are some common rhetorical moves you'll make in much of

the academic writing you do. You'll find that short essays and research articles generally open with three such moves:

- First, you give the **CONTEXT** or general topic of whatever you are writing; frequently, you will do this by discussing the existing research or commentary on the topic you are writing about.
- Second, you point out some aspect of this topic that merits additional attention, often because it is poorly understood or because there is a problem that needs to be solved—that is, you'll show there is a problem or gap of some kind in our understanding.
- Finally, you'll explain how your text addresses that problem or fills that gap. This explanation often happens within the first paragraph or two of the text.

### Document Sources Using the Appropriate Citation Style

Finally, academic writers credit and **DOCUMENT** all sources carefully. Understanding how Western academic culture defines intellectual property and **PLAGIARISM** is complicated. Although you never need to provide a source for common knowledge that no one disputes (for example, that the US Declaration of Independence was approved by Congress on July 4, 1776, in Philadelphia), you will need to document words, information, or ideas that you get from others, including, of course, any content (words or images) you find on the internet.

What else do you need to learn about academic writing? While we hope this chapter gives you a good idea of the major features of academic writing in the United States, you may still find yourself asking questions. What kinds of evidence are necessary to support a claim sufficiently? How much documentation is needed? Should a review of literature primarily describe and summarize existing research, or should it go one step further and critique this research? You will begin to learn the answers to these questions in time, as you advance through college, and especially when you choose your major. But don't be surprised that the immediate answer to questions like these will very often be "It depends." And "it" will always depend on your purpose for writing and on the audience you wish to reach.

In the meantime, even as you work to become fluent in US academic writing, it's worth returning to a note we have sounded frequently in this

chapter: the US way of writing academically is not the only way. Nor is it a better way. Rather, it is a different way. As you learn about other cultures and languages, you may have an opportunity to learn and practice the conventions those cultures use to guide their own forms of academic writing. When you do so, you'll be learning yet another "new" language, just as you have learned the "academic writing" language of the United States.