

INTRODUCTION TO ACADEMIC WRITING

WHAT IS ACADEMIC WRITING?

Academic writing is a form of writing that is **formal**, **objective** and **technical**.

1. Formal:

It avoids casual or conversational language such as contractions (e.g.: *isn't*, *doesn't*, *wouldn't*) or informal vocabulary (e.g.: *live* vs. *reside*, *set up* vs. *establish*, *hopeless* vs. *futile*).

2. Objective (Impersonal):

It avoids direct references to people or feelings and emphasises on objects, facts and ideas.

3. Technical:

It uses vocabulary that is specific to an academic discipline such as business, humanities, natural and applied sciences, or social sciences .

For example, *phoneme*, *morpheme*, *constituent*, *thematic role*, *etymon* are the technical vocabulary used in linguistics (or the scientific study of language) which is a branch of the humanities.



Exercise 1

Complete the table below with the *formal alternatives of the informal words listed*.

Informal word	Formal word
cheap	
empty	
give	

get	
think about	
look at	
look into	
buy	
go against	
all right	
a lot of	
begin	

TYPES OF ACADEMIC WRITING

Academic writing can be divided into four types: **descriptive**, **analytical**, **persuasive** and **critical**.

1. Descriptive Writing

- Descriptive writing is expository and informative. It presents facts or details to the reader but does not interpret their meaning.
- Characteristics:
 - states facts or recounts events
 - gives an overview of a particular topic
 - observes and reports the characteristics of a person, place, thing or phenomenon
 - explains a theory or idea
 - states the *what*, *who* or *where* – but not the *why*, *how* or so *what*

- Example:

In nursing, the theory of cultural competency states that nurses should be aware of their own internalised biases and should approach patients in an open-minded, non-judgemental manner. ← This explains what a theory says.

2. Analytical Writing

- Analytical writing is evaluative and critical. It goes beyond the descriptive presentation of facts or details to the reader; it evaluates and investigates their significance instead.
- Characteristics:
 - engages with and applies theoretical concepts
 - evaluates the strengths and weaknesses of ideas
 - unpacks the significance of evidence
 - synthesises and engages with sources to support and create an overall argument
 - answers the *why*, *how* or so *what* – goes beyond the *what*, *who* or *where*
- Example:

By practicing cultural awareness, a nurse can foster trust with patients of diverse backgrounds and overcome any communication barriers which may hinder accurate symptom reporting and diagnosis. ← This shows why a theory is relevant.

3. Persuasive Writing

- Persuasive writing has all the features of analytical writing with the addition of your **own point of view**.
- Most essays are persuasive, and there is a persuasive element in at least the discussion and conclusion of a research article.
- Points of view in academic writing can include an **argument**, **recommendation**, **interpretation of findings** or **evaluation** of the work of others.

- In persuasive writing, each claim you make needs to be supported by some **evidence**, for example a reference to research findings or published sources.
- The kinds of instructions for a persuasive assignment include: *argue*, *evaluate*, *discuss*, and *take a position*.

4. Critical Writing

- Critical writing is common for research, postgraduate and advanced undergraduate writing.
- It has all the features of persuasive writing, with the added feature of **at least one other point of view**.
- While persuasive writing requires you to have your own point of view on an issue or topic, critical writing requires you to **consider at least two points of view**, including your own.
- For example, you may **explain a researcher's interpretation or argument** and then **evaluate the merits of the argument**, or give your **own alternative interpretation**.
- Examples of critical writing assignments include a **critique of a journal article**, or a **literature review** that identifies the strengths and weaknesses of existing research.
- The kinds of instructions for critical writing include: *critique*, *debate*, *disagree* and *evaluate*.

TYPES OF ACADEMIC TEXT

Academic texts can be divided into **seven** types: essay, research paper, thesis or dissertation, research proposal, literature review, lab report and annotated bibliography.

Type	Description
Essay	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• A short piece of writing that focuses on a particular topic• Written especially by students as part of the work for a course
Research paper	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• A piece of writing that provides analysis, interpretation and argument• Written based on in-depth independent research
Thesis or dissertation	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• An extensive piece of writing that focuses on a particular topic• Written especially for a higher college or university degree
Research proposal	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• A concise and coherent summary of a proposed research• Includes the central issue(s) or question(s) to be addressed and the current state of knowledge and debates on the selected topic
Literature review	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• An overview of the previously published works on a specific topic or research question• Written as part of a thesis, dissertation or research paper

Lab report	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A report that conveys the aim, methods, results and conclusion of a scientific experiment • Commonly used in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) fields
Annotated bibliography	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A list of source references with a short description or evaluation of each source

FEATURES OF ACADEMIC WRITING

There are **seven** distinctive features of academic writing: **structured**, **evidenced**, **critical**, **balanced**, **precise**, **objective** and **formal**.

1. Structured:

- Academic writing is well-structured.
- The structure is determined based on the type of text. For example:
 - a **lab report** has **8 sections**, arranged in this order: title, abstract, introduction, methods and materials, results, discussion, conclusion and references; and
 - an **essay** has **3 sections**, arranged in this order: introductory paragraph (which includes a thesis statement), body paragraphs (which include a topic sentence each) and concluding paragraph.
- Academic writing should be **coherent** (the progression of the writing is logical) and **cohesive** (the connection between different parts of the writing is clear).

2. Evidenced:

- Claims made in academic writing should be supported by evidence.
- Different academic disciplines use different types of evidence. For example:
 - in **arts** disciplines, **published sources** are the main evidence; while

- in **science** disciplines, **empirical data** such as statistics or other experimental results are the main evidence.
- Academic writing relies on sources from experts in the field; therefore, it is important to appropriately reference the sources through the use of **in-text citations** and **reference list**.

3. Critical:

- Academic writing does not only describe facts or details; it **analyses** and **evaluates** them.
- An academic writer should make judgement about these facts or details before deciding whether or how to integrate them into his own writing.
- This is known as **critical writing**, and it requires a great deal of research in order for the writer to develop a great depth of understanding of a topic.

4. Balanced:


- Academic writing should be **balanced**.
- It is important for academic writers to make decisions about their **stance** on a particular subject or the **strength of the claims** they are making.
- Writers could use **caution** or **hedging language** to soften their claims and statements, to make them less direct and to limit or qualify them.
- Below are examples of hedging language:

Hedging in Academic Writing

Purpose


Express hesitation or uncertainty.

Demonstrate politeness and indirectness.







Hedging Language

Believe, assume, suggest, seem, tend, looks like, appear to be, think, possibly, perhaps, conceivably, could, may, might, it could be the case that..., it might be suggested that..., there is every hope that..., etc.

 **Hedging:** Weismann suggested that polar bears hibernate presumably to conserve the fat in their body.

No hedging: Weismann found that polar bears hibernate to conserve fat in their body.

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- On the other hand, writers could use **boosters** to emphasise or strengthen statements.
- Boosters are less common in academic writing, but they are used to strengthen the position when writers are **absolutely committed to their statements**.
- Some examples of boosters include *certainly, indeed, always, undoubtedly, in fact, clearly, actually, obviously, know, prove, conclusively, definitely, evidently, absolutely, and firmly*.

5. Precise:

- Academic writing should use **clear** and **precise** language to ensure the reader **understands the meaning**.
- A technical term should be used when it conveys the meaning more precisely than a similar non-technical term.
- If a technical term is not commonly used by others in the same discipline, it needs to be defined so that it will be understood by the reader.

6. Objective:

- Academic writing is objective. This means the **emphasis** is placed on the **arguments** and **information**, and not the writer.
- Due to this, academic writing tends to use nouns and noun phrases more than verbs and adverbs.
- It also tends to use more **passive voice** rather than active voice. For example:

– *The sandwich was eaten.* ← The subject receives the action (passive voice)

– *I ate the sandwich.* ← The subject performs the action (active voice)

7. Formal:

- Academic writing is more formal than everyday writing.
- It tends to use **longer** and more **complex** sentences.
- It avoids **contractions** and **colloquial words or expressions** that are common in spoken language.



Exercise 2

Underline words and phrases that are used to hedge and boost claims.

There are a number of explanations for why musicians have superior cognitive abilities to non-musician controls. First, it is possible that only the more intellectually rigorous people continue with music training once they have been exposed to it. Practicing a musical instrument takes a tremendous amount of discipline. Individuals who are willing to work that hard may also work hard in academic settings, thus improving their cognitive abilities. Secondly, socio-economic class could be playing a role. In a study comparing scholastic aptitude among musicians and non-musicians, Phillips found a difference in the two groups, but once socio-economic class was taken into account the difference nearly disappeared (Phillips, 1976). It is possible that the differences between musicians and non-musicians is actually innate or caused by something not musically related in the environment.



Exercise 3

Rewrite the following sentences in the passive voice.

Active voice:

Thomas Edison invented the electric light bulb.

Passive voice:

Active voice:

Malaysians discard approximately 33,000 metric tonnes of rubbish on a daily basis.

Passive voice:

Active voice:

The government will impose hefty fines on business operators who breach the Covid-19 standard operating procedures (SOP).

Passive voice:

STRUCTURES OF ACADEMIC TEXT

Structure is an important feature of academic writing. A well-structured text enables the reader to **follow the argument** and **navigate the text**.

A **clear structure** and **logical flow** are imperative to produce a **cohesive** text.

The commonly-used structures in academic texts are: the **three-part essay** and **IMRaD** structures.

1. The Three-Part Essay Structure:

The three-part essay structure consists of three sections:

- introduction
- body
- conclusion

The introduction and the conclusion should be shorter than the body of the text.

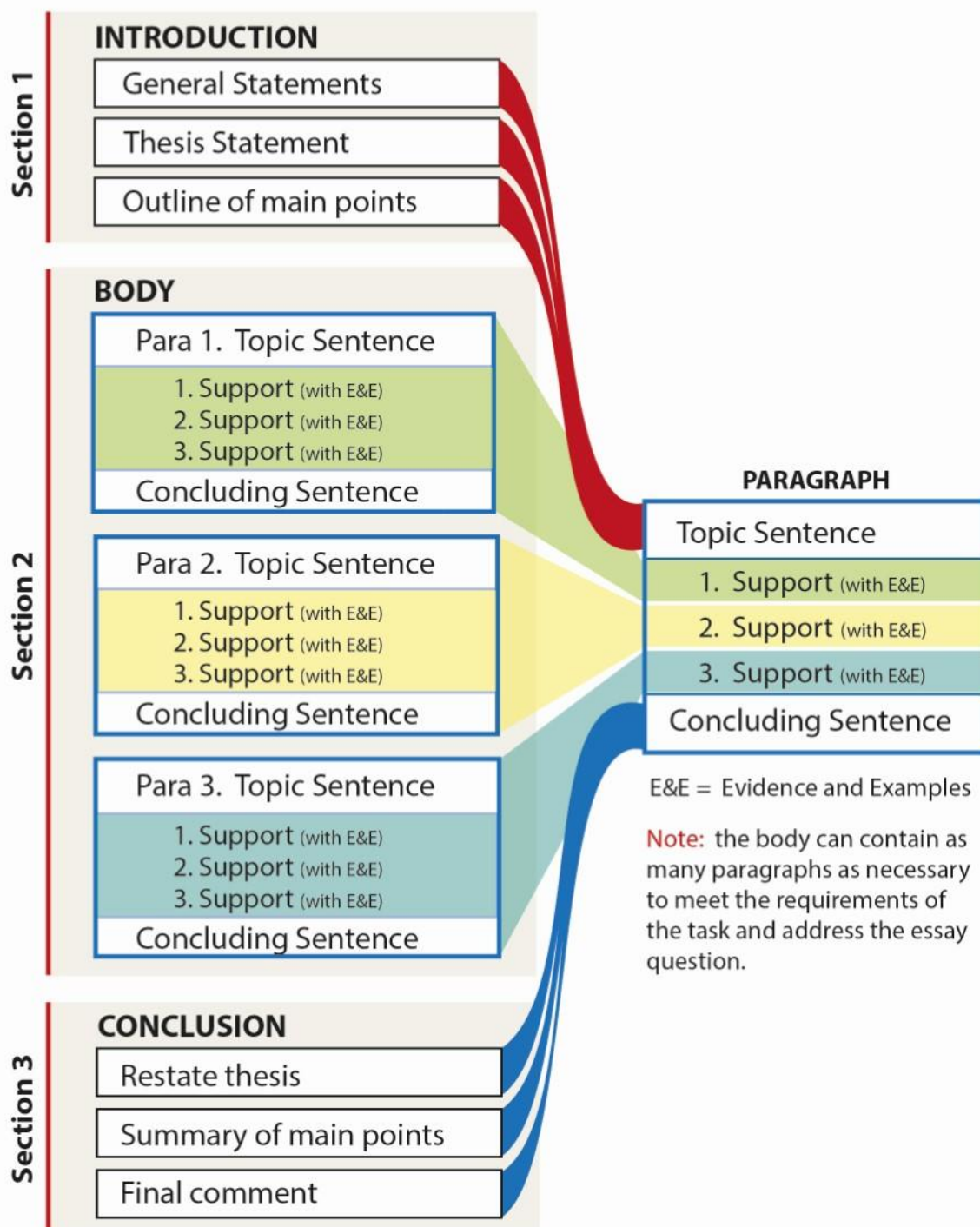
For shorter essays, one or two paragraphs for each of these sections should be appropriate.

For longer texts or theses, they may be several pages long.

Below is a diagrammatic representation of the three-part essay structure:

BASIC ESSAY STRUCTURE

An essay has 3 sections: an introduction, body and conclusion.

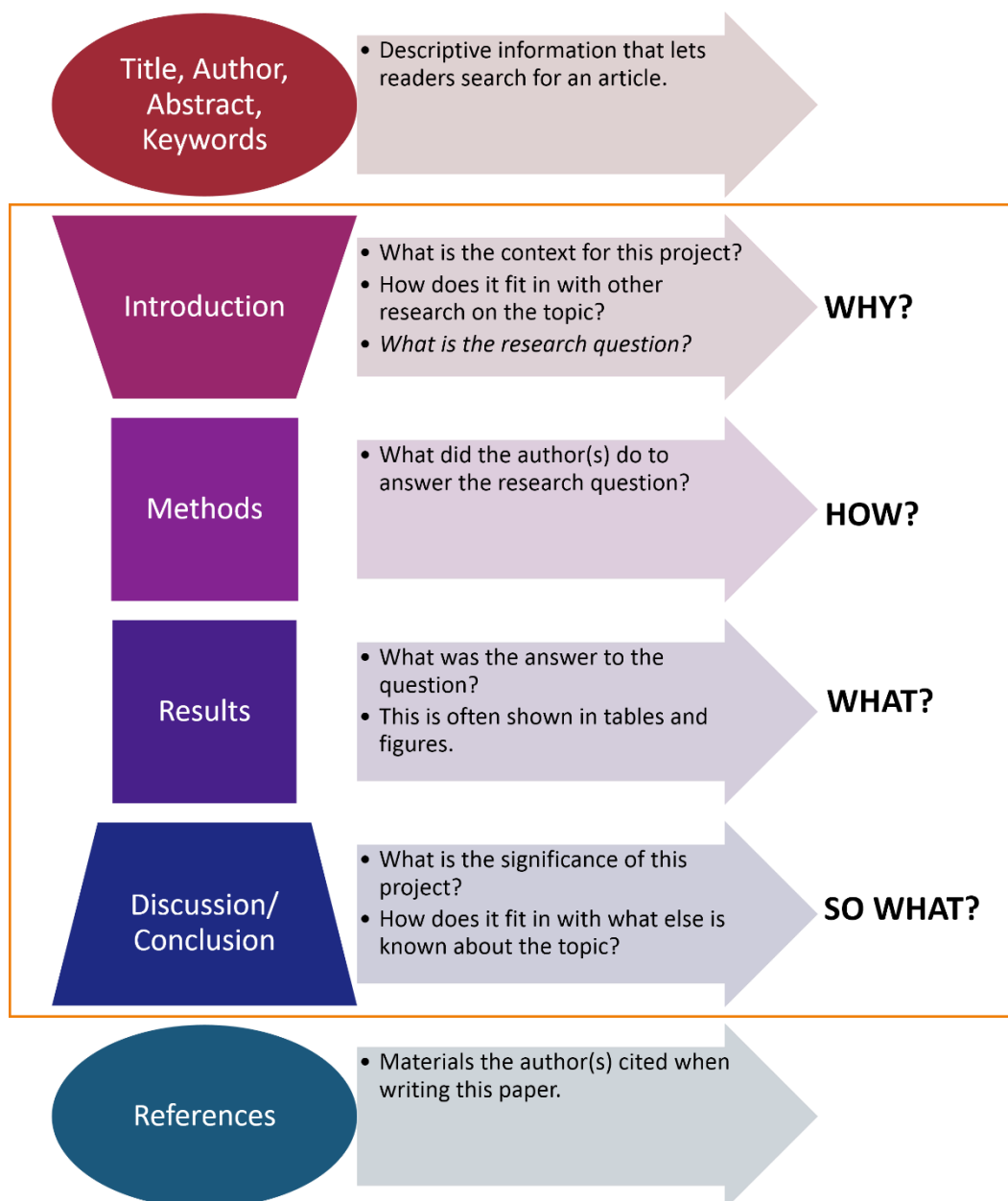


2. The IMRaD Structure:

The IMRaD structure are divided into four sections:

- introduction
- methods
- results
- discussion

Below is a diagrammatic representation of the IMRaD structure:



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