

Writing for Academic Audiences

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Learning Outcomes

In this chapter students will learn

- the difference between academic audiences and general audiences.
- how to observe and understand the discourse community of a certain field
- the characteristics of academic writing including
 - academic genres
 - style guides
 - scholarly voice

7.1 How to Write for Academic Audiences



Here comes the sad bride. Photo from [Picqsels.com](https://www.picqsels.com).

I promise, my husband and I didn't *try* to ruin his brother's wedding. In our defense, Andre and Emily [names have been changed to protect the people who are still mad] got married five days after us, and in all the hubbub with two weddings in the family, no one actually remembered to give us their formal wedding invitation. Let me add that my husband and I even decided to postpone our honeymoon and stay in the local area for a whole week just so we could attend their wedding, so we should get some points for that.

Well, we stayed in a town in the mountains that was a lot farther away from downtown Salt Lake City than we'd realized. So by the time we arrived at the wedding, everyone had been sitting there waiting for 45 minutes—and they'd just sent the oldest brother Mike down the hallway to do one last check to see if we'd finally shown up. (You've probably figured out that these were the days before cell phones.)

We ran around the corner in the nick of time, yelled out to Mike, and followed him, running our fastest down the hallways and stairs to the wedding even though I was wearing a fitted pink dress and heels and my husband was in a fancy, dark suit. We ran into the room huffing and puffing and looked around apologetically only to see all our family members—dressed completely in white. Apparently, Andre and Emily had decided it would be a beautiful idea to have *everyone* wear white to their wedding, but no one had thought to tell us—so there we were for the rest of the ceremony, looking like two ugly weeds in a field of exquisite flowers. And because we were late, we had to walk past everyone and sit in the front row, invading everyone's view including the bride and groom's. To this day, Andre and Emily think we ruined their moment on purpose out of jealousy for having our weddings so close together, but I promise it was just that we were ill-informed. You've got to believe me!



We stuck out worse than this flower. #weddingfail Photo by [Rupert Britton](#) on Unsplash

Why do I bring up this painful story, you ask? Because it illustrates the point of this chapter. Remember in [Chapter 1](#) when we talked about discourse communities and the word "shibboleth" as an indicator that someone doesn't belong to a group? You guessed it. My husband and I obviously didn't belong in the "apparently-now-it's-okay-to-wear-white-to-a-wedding" group and wished we'd been better informed. If only we'd done our homework (read the invitation and looked at a map) and learned to say the proverbial "sh" in shibboleth before we were socially obliterated that day with mean glares and long, sad sighs in our direction.

It turns out academic audiences care about style, too. If everyone else in your field uses careful, formal language and rigid organizational formats and you waltz in with casual slang and ideas that don't always make sense, you're not going to go very far. Now don't get me wrong—in academic writing, some diversion from the norm is tolerated, but you have to earn it.



Before developing this unique style, Picasso studied conventional painting techniques at the best art school in Spain. [Violon \(Violin\) by Pablo Picasso.](#)

Did you know the artist Pablo Picasso went to the best art school in Spain and learned how to paint very traditional paintings before developing his unique, convention-altering style? (Google "Picasso early paintings" if you don't believe me.) He first needed the skills and understanding of what the norm was in his field in order to break those conventions and create a new style in response. You, too, should spend time listening to and observing the conversations going on in your field so you can learn the lingo—the jargon—and understand the conventions people use. Not because you want to simply conform, but rather, so that you can understand your audience and know the best ways to get your message across and be heard. And if you want to change the conventions along the way, go for it. But you're more likely to have an influence if you first learn what the standards are.

It's All About Character

The trick to writing for academic audiences resides in the concept of Character. For more on character, see [Chapter 2: Writing Tools](#). When you want to contribute to an academic discourse community, they have to believe that you know what you're talking about, that you're trustworthy, that you're logically minded, that you have good character. Some people have an advantage with things like PhD's and publications that indicate they can be trusted. But what can an inexperienced undergrad do to convince other academics to listen? I think the best answer is to act like a spy.



Learning about your field is a lot like being a spy. Photo by [Nathan Dumlao](#) on Unsplash

Good spies gather intel before going out in public. They listen to the conversation stream, observe, practice. Then once they're out in the field, they fake it 'till they make it. As they go, they learn the tricks and language that bring them to be accepted into a group. In fact, spying and writing are so similar that some of the world's best writers were spies and some of the best spies became writers (see Ernest Hemingway, John Le Carre, Ian Fleming, and W. Somerset Maugham, for example).

So start your observations. Notice the language and structure as you read research articles for a class assignment. Note the levels of formality in the scholarly articles and books you read in your field. Join [LinkedIn](#) and start following big names in your field. Listen to the way your professors talk and write. Keep a "Jargon journal" where you list words you notice are specific to your field.

Another way to learn is by doing—by writing all those beloved research papers you've been assigned in the past. It turns out all those assignments to gather reliable sources and use formal language were an effort to prepare you for academic writing. Can you believe the reason that your teachers have been assigning you research papers for years was not because they hate your guts but because they actually care about your guts? It turns out research papers are designed to help you practice the most important characteristics of academic writing. Let's talk more about those characteristics.

7.2 What Sets Academic Writing Apart?



I love this picture from 1962 of researchers collaborating at the National Cancer Institute. Photo by [National Cancer Institute](#) on Unsplash

Writing for Academic Audiences is also known as "scholarly writing" and is, therefore, meant to be read by scholars in a particular field. It usually involves research of some kind—whether it's written to record the data in an experiment (like a lab journal), or to request research funding (a grant proposal), to review what's been done in the field (a literature review), or to compose a final write-up of one's experimental results (a research article).

Another way to define academic writing is to talk about what it's *not*. It's not the kind of writing found in popular sources such as online newspapers, blogs, magazines, Instagram, or Twitter—those are all intended for a "general audience" or a "popular audience" composed of people in general, not in a specific field.

Here's a comparison of how writing for a general audience differs from academic writing:

General Audience	vs.	Academic Audience
Short paragraphs	vs.	Long paragraphs
Engaging, friendly tone	vs.	Serious, academic tone
Logical progression/light referencing	vs.	Synthesized claims, heavy referencing
Clever wording to encourage insight	vs.	Clarity to avoid misunderstanding

Focus on practical application	vs.	Focus on knowledge and scientific advancement
Passionate writing with conviction	vs.	Objective writing with solid backing
Focus on narrative and relevance to audience	vs.	Focus on data, methods, and results
Most appeals are to emotions and authority/character	vs.	Most appeals are to logic and authority/character
Hyperlinks or endnotes for references	vs.	In-text citations and reference lists in APA format (or another style guide)

Academic vs. General Audiences

Give an example of something you've read recently that was written for an academic audience (like a research article, lab report, scholarly book, etc.). Now explain at least three ways the academic text was different than something you've recently read that was written for a general audience (online newspaper, blog, Instagram, etc.).

7.3 Shortcuts in Academic Writing



Scholars have developed shortcuts to make it easier to share information in their field. Haven't you always wanted a shortcut like this? #bookshelfdoor Photo by [Stefan Steinbauer](#) on Unsplash

As scholars have communicated over the years, people in specific fields began using shortcuts like shared vocabulary words (jargon) or uniform organization to make it easier to understand and/or access the most important information in their field. These shortcuts have developed when a discourse community has needed a standard way of doing something.

Genre



A message in a bottle: probably not the best format for a letter of recommendation. Photo by [Charlotte Noelle](#) on Unsplash

Many of these agreed-upon shortcuts have now turned into their own Genres or expected ways of formatting a document. For example, if you ask your professor to recommend you to a graduate program, you expect them to write a formal letter of recommendation rather than, say, a text message or a message in a bottle. And, in fact, the formality and rigid organization of the letter of recommendation themselves signal to the audience that this is an official statement, that it should be taken much more seriously than a text message (or bottle message), and that the author has put significant thought and time into the document. The choice of genre alone is a sign to the audience of the document's context and purpose.

So just like you keep a "jargon journal," start paying attention to and noting the genres you see used most in your field as well. For instance, you might have noticed that the typical format for a research article follows the IMRAD Format: Introduction, Methods, Results, and Discussion. This format was developed by the scientific community to report research results because it makes it very easy to find information fast. Scholarly readers know they'll always find the review of literature in the Introduction section and a summary of the data analysis in the Results section. This also makes it easy to compare across several articles like to analyze the techniques reported in the Methods section of several articles. For more tips on reading and interpreting IMRAD articles, see [Chapter 8: Finding and Evaluating Sources](#).

Peer-Reviewed Journals

As people began reporting on their research, they needed venues in which to show others what they learned. So groups of scholars created specialized journals where people could publish their research for others to see. Every field has many academic journals like [The Journal of Neuroscience](#), [Progress in Human Geography](#), or [The Annual Review of](#)

[Public Health](#) where the main scholarly conversations are happening today—and most have very high standards. To keep their standards high, the editors of journals use the peer review process where all articles are reviewed by two or more experts who give feedback on such things as the quality of the research, the caliber of the methodology, the accuracy of the results, and even the style of the writing. This feedback then goes back to the authors who revise and resubmit their articles until they're accepted for publication. (I hope this reminds you of the revision process we talked about in [Chapter 3: Writing Processes](#).)

Style Guides



Not that kind of Style Guide—style as in writing. Photo by [Alexandra Gorn](#) on Unsplash

These journals also brought about another shortcut for scholars: a set standard for the style of writing. When people submit articles for review to be published in an academic journal, they have to make a lot of decisions about the style of their writing. (See [Chapter 5: Style](#) for a thorough discussion of the stylistic decisions writers make.) How would you know if you should include an Oxford Comma—a comma in a list after the word "and"—or if headings should be bolded or if you need to include a title page and an abstract? Many of these decisions are arbitrary (they don't matter very much in the grand scheme of things), but not all of them are—and either way, a decision still has to be made.

Luckily, academic journals started publishing the answers to these questions in "Style Guides" so people wouldn't have to ask all the nitpicky questions. One of the most famous style guides came in 1929 from the [American Psychological Association \(APA\)](#). This guide has gone through many editions (the 2019 7th edition is the most recent) and has become the standard for most of the social sciences today. (For more information on APA style, see [Chapter 9: Talking About Sources](#)). The APA Manual delineates all the minute as well as the major standards they've decided on for the social sciences including everything from a specific way to cite sources (year first, then the author's name, etc.) to whether or not to use the Oxford Comma (yes) to an entire section on how to avoid biased language. In fact, it was a big deal when the latest edition announced a change from requiring two spaces after every period to one. (You can see how nerdy things can get over at the APA!)

And even though the APA decided on certain standards, that doesn't mean all style guides are the same. For example, the [Chicago Manual of Style \(CMS\)](#) (or the closely related [Turabian](#) style) is used in some social sciences like history, and the [American Sociological Association Style Guide](#) is used in—you guessed it—sociology. Even businesses and universities can have a style guide to keep things standardized in all their publications. For instance, here's a link to my university's [style guide](#) for how to use their logo properly. So my point isn't which style guide is better, but rather, that you should figure out which style guide is used most in your field and follow that. It will provide many of the shortcuts to your discourse community.

And don't forget that teachers can have their own preferences when it comes to style. If you've ever written a paper and didn't know whether or not you needed a title page, then you know what I'm talking about. The best way to figure out what your teacher expects stylistically is to read the assignment instructions; they probably tell you which style to follow for citations (APA, Turabian, ASA, etc.). And if you can't find the answer, just ask your teacher.

Scholarly Voice

One final note on writing for academic audiences is to pay attention to the formality of your language. Again, much of what you need to know about writing style is covered in your style guide and in [Chapter 5: Style](#). But I just want to emphasize one last thing that sets apart academic writing: voice.

Linguist Averil Coxhead at Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand compiled [The Academic Word List](#), a list of the 570 word families that appear most frequently in academic texts but not in general texts. Here's a list of the top 60 words from that list of academic words. Read through them and ask yourself why these words are used much more in scholarly works than in general texts.

Analyze, Approach, Area, Assess, Assume, Authority, Available, Benefit, Concept, Consist, Constitute, Context, Contract, Create, Data, Define, Derive, Distribute, Economy, Environment, Establish, Estimate, Evident, Export, Factor, Finance, Formula, Function, Identify, Income, Indicate, Individual, Interpret, Involve, Issue, Labor, Legal, Legislate, Major, Method, Occur, Percent, Period, Policy, Principle, Proceed, Process, Require, Research, Respond, Role, Section, Sector, Significant, Similar, Source, Specific, Structure, Theory, Vary

Academic Word List

Choose 3 words from the Academic Word List (above) and explain why you think they specifically are used much more frequently in academic texts than in general texts.

I hope you can see that precision, clarity, and formality are favored in academic writing. Each of those words helps writers describe something very specific. You probably don't use the word "method" much in your daily life but when you're describing how you set up an experiment, it would come up frequently. I hope you're getting a feel for how much more specific and formal academic writing is than other kinds of writing.



Ready for prom, not a pool party. Photo by [Ngobile Vundla](#) on Unsplash

However, that doesn't mean that you need to lose your "voice" when you write for an academic audience; rather, you simply need to elevate your language, formalize it. Just as you wouldn't wear a tuxedo to a pool party, you wouldn't wear a swimsuit to the prom (at least, I hope you wouldn't). But no matter what you wear, you're still you.

The same goes for writing. You can still be you and write in a more formal style—it just means that you need to take advantage of higher-level skills like using vocabulary from your field, adding strong transitions between sentences and paragraphs, and incorporating reliable evidence. (For more help with this, again see [Chapter 5: Style](#)). But be careful; this sophistication can be done to a fault.

I had a friend in high school who would write with the biggest, most abstruse words she could find (like the word "abstruse") and put them in long, complicated sentences—and it paid off in the form of good grades on papers. Her high school teachers were impressed by her vocabulary and sophistication compared to her peers, but when she got to college, she was surprised to find out that it didn't impress her college teachers. That's because they could see through it—her writing was inauthentic. They could tell that she was adding complication to sound sophisticated but it actually gave the impression of trying too hard. This friend had to learn to keep her own voice and focus more on clarity and cohesion rather than complication. Similarly, to be a good academic writer, you need to focus on precise writing, not complex writing.

Can You Use "I" in Academic Writing?

Along with the tendency to be complex comes the tendency to obscure your voice through the Passive Voice ("It was done" rather than "I did it") and Third Person (using he/she rather than first person "I"). Although older professors still believe that you should not refer to yourself as "I" in formal papers, this standard has been changing. It's now accepted and sometimes encouraged in most fields to use the term "I" (see the [APA Manual of Style](#)).

7.4 A Word About This Textbook

Now before you go accusing us of talking the talk and not walking the walk, please note that we deliberately wrote this textbook in a casual, conversational style that's also decidedly not "academic." In [Chapter 14: Writing for General Audiences](#), we'll talk in depth about why we made this choice, but we hope that by now you can tell that this textbook is not in an academic, scholarly, serious style. We would hate for you to model your academic papers after our casual style—instead, please recognize that when you're reporting on research, you have a different Rhetorical Situation than we have in this book.

Your purpose in an academic paper is to make a formal, logical argument for your professor to show how well you've researched a topic while *our* purpose in this book is to teach college students about writing in an engaging manner that hopefully doesn't put you to sleep. So please look to texts in your field, your professors' assignment instructions, and the student examples in this book to help you gauge the right level of formality for your academic writing. But once you go on Instagram or Twitter, feel free to be as casual as you want!

Looking Ahead



In high school you did baby research. Photo by [Janko Ferlic](#) on Unsplash

The chapters in this unit about Writing for Academic Audiences revolve around analysis and research because academic writing usually revolves around—guess what? Analysis and research. In high school and in your first-year college writing course, you most likely learned how to write a basic research paper. You learned how to think of an argument, turn it into a thesis statement, find quotes that matched your thesis statement, and restate your thesis in your conclusion. Maybe you even learned how to write the infamous ["five-paragraph essay."](#) You probably also figured out how to write in a more formal tone. Those are all good skills you've honed. But they're baby skills.



Now you should do grown-up research. Photo by [National Cancer Institute](#) on [Unsplash](#)

Now that you're an adult, we want to take your research and analysis skills to the next level. The tragic flaw of typical research papers is that they actually don't teach you how to do good research. Instead, they teach you how to make an argument and justify your argument with quotes you find to support that argument. You don't actually have to know what's going on, what the state of the field is—you just have to find sources that match what you're trying to say. But that's not how real-world research works.

Mature scholars start their research by looking at what's been done, they analyze what's out there and figure out where the gaps and limitations are in current research, then they make their arguments and plans for future research *based on what they found*. FYI, this is something undergraduates are notoriously bad at.

So we're going to focus the rest of this *Unit 2: Writing for Academic Audiences* on skills that will flex the most important research and writing muscles you're missing. Chapters 8-12 will focus on finding and evaluating sources, talking about sources, learning about the genre of the literature review—a specific kind of research paper, and following the steps for creating a sophisticated literature review. Then in chapter 13, we'll show you how to propose a research project that will fill in gaps in current research.

So don't be like my husband and me and embarrass yourself in a big way; do your homework and get informed before putting yourself out there so that when you have something to say, you can confidently enter the conversation and people will not only admire your style, they'll listen to what you have to say.



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