

REASONS AND TECHNIQUES TO IMPROVE ACADEMIC WRITING SKILLS

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Abstract: Of all varieties of writing, academic writing is one which most foreign language learners and students in general find the most difficult to master. Yet, this is probably the skill which most of them, as well as their teachers, consider essential in becoming academically successful. The difficulty in mastering it is partly rooted in misunderstanding the constituent features of academic writing as well as associated practices required to improve it. This article aims to explain the importance of academic writing for students and suggest a series of large-scale and small-scale techniques for them to apply in order to become more proficient writers.

Keywords: academic writing, importance, techniques, strategic suggestions, style, improvement

ПРИЧИНЫ И ПРИЁМЫ СОВЕРШЕНСТВОВАНИЯ НАВЫКОВ АКАДЕМИЧЕСКОГО ПИСЬМА

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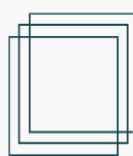
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Аннотация

Академическое письмо является той разновидностью письма, овладеть которой большинство изучающих язык и студентов в целом считают наиболее трудным. При этом, оно представляет собой навык, который многие из них, равно как и их преподаватели, считают обязательным для достижения академических успехов.



Трудность в овладении данным навыком частично связана с неправильным пониманием составляющих характерных черт академического письма и связанных с ним видов деятельности, необходимых для его совершенствования. Целью данной статьи является обосновать важность академического письма для студентов и представить ряд приемов общего и специфического характера, которые могут быть применены для повышения их опыта в данной сфере.

Ключевые слова: академическое письмо, важность, приемы, стратегические рекомендации, стиль, совершенствование

Introduction

Writing is a skill that is difficult to master individually and that requires formal instruction. At the same time, its significance cannot be underestimated as most of the students' assessed academic output is made in written form in numerous assignment forms. It comes in especially handy when the student is handling complex academic writing assignments. Among a number of the varieties of writing, academic writing is one that not many people are able to master. The quantity of essays which students usually come up with is often inadequate to make them experienced in the skill. Essentially, one has to realize that high-standard academic writing is based on a number of demands which the students need to be made aware of and master. As broadly defined by IsEssay (2018), academic writing is the process of producing a concise, clear, focused, and structured piece of writing that is supported by evidence.

Reasons to improve academic writing. Academic writing is viewed as having a number of distinctive features:

- **it is focused and planned**, i.e. is deep in the sense of answering the questions and exploring the topic;
- **it is structured**, i.e. represents a single piece which is constituted by a number of logically connected parts;
- **it is backed by evidence**, i.e. the writer's opinions and arguments are based on evidence, which is properly referenced;
- **it is formal**, i.e. its language features ensure a balanced, clear and concise tone and a consistent style.

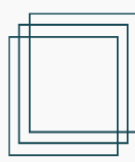
These broad features create a number of positive outcomes for the learners in academic performance and a number of general life skills. Academic essays provide students with the opportunity to **practice expressing their vision of academic input**, which is often sophisticated and difficult to explain. The ideas they learn or read about often require using appropriate terminology and wording to deliver the message to a reader.



Students often become **better analytical thinkers** because academic writing makes them research information and analyze its relevance and other characteristics. Due to its formal nature, academic writing focuses strongly on style and technique and helps students **master the established standards of language** for it to be at its best in conveying ideas. As a result, learners evolve as writers in general and tend to be more successful in writing academic papers. Academic writing **enhances objectivity** and gets learners to look at the issue raised from multiple viewpoints, analyze theories from different perspectives, and make statements based on their understanding. It also develops learners' **research skills**. When it comes to using internet as a research tool, academic writing is an excellent motivation factor for the learners to gather data, analyze every piece of information that they obtain and go through the process of discovering the information that relates to their area of study. The skill of forming informed opinions that the students work out as a result of these processes can as well be of good use if the learners choose to continue with academic activity and become professional researchers, needing to produce academic pieces.

Techniques that can help improve academic writing skills. As writing is a skill, it can be subject to continuous improvement over time provided there is adequate practice. On a broad level, the following set of strategies can be proposed to one who aims to improve own academic writing:

- **Review the fundamentals of grammar and spelling.** The desired impact on the reader is ensured only if one's writing features proper grammar and spelling. These are important as they indicate a writer's professionalism and attention to detail. The writing also becomes more advanced when colons, semicolons, dashes and other less-common punctuation marks are used, which makes sentences more complex and interesting to read. A classic reference resource for the writers in the field is *The Elements of Style* by W. Strunk and E.B. White. Computer tools like spell check can be useful to help with the slips, but should not be heavily relied on because of the cases like look-alikes, which such tools fail to detect.
- **Study good examples of what you are writing.** The writers can benefit from reading the existing texts of the type that they are writing. Thus, if one has to write a film review, a good starting point would be to look at several examples of reviews and note down the common features of their structure, especially those that appear to make them successful. Imitating these good features in own writing can substantially assist the writer. In general, the habit to read on a daily basis is an effective factor to improve one's speech, which eventually affects writing.
- **Do proofreading.** A good writer never submits or shows their work to public as soon as the work is finished. First, it is recommended to set the writing aside for some time to "refresh" the mind and re-approach it with more objective eyes. Then, it is recommended to edit easy points of the writing, such as spelling, wording and grammar and finally re-edit for more serious problems like structure and transitions.



It is also highly recommended to recheck the writing for redundancy, repetition and obvious ideas in order to reduce wordiness and make the message clearer to the reader. Proofreading becomes more effective when it is done out loud. This makes it much easier to identify and eliminate awkward collocations and inconsistencies of flow.

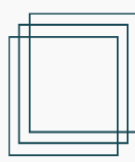
- **Ask someone's evaluation.** Any piece of writing is essentially created for the sake of being read by someone. Finding a reader and getting their feedback on how well they are able to interpret a piece of writing (or its certain features) can give valuable information on the strengths and weaknesses of the piece. Specifying the reader's task (such as limiting their focus on the structure only, or a certain part of the piece, or features like persuasiveness, accuracy, grammar) would give even better results. A friend, relative, coworker or teacher would make highly suitable feedback providers for a student's written work.

- **Focus on structure.** The global arrangement of ideas is no less important for the quality of academic writing than grammar and spelling. To ensure that the ideas logically flow and fit together well, it is best to outline the piece. Such an outline will help to visualize the flow and identify the sections which lack supporting details. Different rhetorical types of the pieces of academic writing require different structural components. Thus, a comparison/contrast essay would require the writer either to provide two separate blocks of ideas, each focusing on all the features of one of the items compared, or to provide a chain of paired comparisons of separate individual features of the items in a point-by-point way.

- **Do plenty of writing practice.** Writing is best learned by doing, which is why no noticeable improvement will occur unless a student writes systematically and rather frequently. Helpful ways to do this might include blogging, joining a writing workshop, writing letters, writing for Opinions section of available publications. Apart from strategic suggestions above, there are certain "smaller-scale" ways to polish academic writing so it could evoke greater interest on the part of the reader. These ways mostly deal with style and can be said to tackle the building blocks of academic writing:

- a) When choosing between active and passive voice, choose the former one. Thus, a sentence "The house was cleaned by me." (Passive) is more wordy and heavier than "I cleaned the house." (Active). Passive voice construction should be reserved for the cases when the agent is unknown, such as: "I have no idea who the house was cleaned by."

- b) Use complex punctuation patterns. In the case of two adjacent complementary sentences, a good decision would be to combine them into one using a **semicolon (;)** ("I was decorating the room; my sister was untangling the garland."). A **colon (:)** shall introduce a list of items ("I bought a few things: paper, ink and stationery.") or precede



a big revelation (“Our relationships are missing one important feeling: understanding.”). A **dash (–)** is a good way to bracket off explanatory information (“Even my friend Dan – who hated all types of surprise – confessed my relatives were original and interesting in how they wanted to greet me on my birthday.”) or to be used to introduce big revelations in place of a colon.

c) Avoid chopiness and vary sentence structure. A series of short sentences linked by nothing except meaning can never make the writing “flow”, which should therefore be avoided. Instead, a writer should try to combine them into complex, extended sentences. Thus, the string “She scrubbed the floors. They were dirty. She used a mop. She sighed sadly. It was as if she were a servant.” would make the writing choppy. Unlike it, the string “She scrubbed the dirty floors using a mop, as if she were a servant. She sighed sadly.” contains only two sentences and creates a much stronger sense of flow. The monotony of sentence structure is closely related to this. The short sentences of choppy texts tend to be based on analogous structures making the text rather boring for readers.

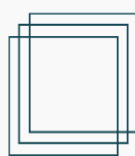
d) Minimize repetition and wordiness. Certain words and structures convey the same or very similar meanings despite having different forms. Thus, rather than labelling a person or thing “annoying and irritating”, a strong writer would simply write “annoying”. Likewise, certain grammar structures tend to complicate expression. Compare: “That very villain who killed all animals in my cowshed was my neighbor’s dog.” and “My neighbor’s dog killed all animals in my cowshed.” The latter version is much more concise and fosters reader’s understanding.

e) Use familiar vocabulary at the same time working to expand it. Big words aren’t always effective to convey the meaning. At the same time, a student writer may be likely to misuse them. It should be noted though that the choice of very weak vocabulary items isn’t a good option either. To make reading work best in improving one’s writing, it is advisable to look up unknown words, notice the features of their usage and add them to a list.

f) Maintain appropriate level of formality. A writer must always be aware that he/she addresses general educated unfamiliar audience and has to avoid informal language features (phrasal verbs, colloquialisms, slang etc.).

Discussion and Conclusions

There is no doubt that academic writing plays a critical part in the successful performance of students and researchers. It is a medium through which one can manifest own thinking; therefore, the mastery of this medium is often the matter of academic failure or success. This function also makes it an effective tool in developing various characteristics of thinking: becoming a better writer means becoming a better thinker.

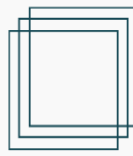


Writing several essays is clearly insufficient to attain high performance standards in academic writing. The route to becoming a successful writer is essentially continuous, systematic and involves multiple components. The role of input in this course shall not be underestimated – only good readers can make good writers. Reading gives a writer food for thought, the startup ideas to react to and express this reaction. Yet, being a critical reader is needed to evaluate own pieces and learn from the experience of other writers by studying the effective technical features of their works. The focus on language is highly important to become proficient in the skill. Style has as significant role in conveying the message as the idea of the message itself. A misexpressed message due to improper wording, grammar or punctuation can never have a desired impact on the reader. An evolving writer must as well keep in mind the importance of getting feedback for his/her works as own vision of certain features may appear to be misleading or be based on the lack of knowledge or skill. To help the writer identify this, an unbiased experienced reader would make an excellent resource. Small-scale features like sentence structure and length, the choice of punctuation tools, word choice and tone also need to be controlled; otherwise, a refined piece of academic writing can never be attained.

To sum up all of the above constituents of professional growth, one needs to develop solid linguistic knowledge, ensure variance of expression and be active, clear, and concise in order to develop the skills of academic writing.

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