



# Demystifying the Discourse: Techniques to Effective Academic Writing

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## Article History

Received: 2024.01.14

Revised: 2024.06.02

Accepted: 2024.06.16

Published: 2024.06.17

## Keywords

Academic writing

Citation

Language

Plagiarism

Style

## How to cite:

Barasa, D. (2024). Demystifying the Discourse: Techniques to Effective Academic Writing. *Eastern African Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences*, 1(1), 13-21.

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## Abstract

Academic writing is a distinct style of communication with its own set of conventions and purposes. It goes beyond simply expressing personal opinions to engaging in a scholarly conversation, critically analysing existing knowledge, and presenting well-reasoned arguments supported by evidence. This paper aims to unpack the often-opaque world of academic writing, presenting a toolbox of techniques for writers to craft clear and impactful texts. Drawing on genre theory developed by Miller (1984), the study will analyse common academic writing structures and the rhetorical moves employed within them. Genre theory offers a valuable framework for untangling the complexities of academic writing. Using a critical literature review methodology, the paper will synthesize existing research on effective academic writing strategies. This analysis will identify key elements such as establishing context, presenting arguments, and integrating sources. The paper is designed to be accessible to a broad audience, providing writers with the tools and frameworks necessary to not only understand academic writing but also to confidently participate in scholarly conversations.

## Introduction

Academic writing is a specific style of communication used within scholarly communities. It is characterised by a formal tone, clear organisation, and the use of credible sources to support arguments and ideas (Hacker, 2016). The primary purpose of academic writing is not to entertain but to contribute to a specific field of knowledge by critically analysing existing research and presenting original ideas (Loewe, 2023). Accordingly, academic writing extends far beyond mastering grammar and sentence structure. Unlike creative writing, the focus here is not on captivating the reader with flair but ensuring a clear and accurate transmission of knowledge. This is achieved through a meticulous approach to language and style, characterised by formal language, precise vocabulary, and clear sentence structure.

Effective academic writing is essential for success in higher education and other research institutions. It allows writers to demonstrate their understanding of complex concepts, engage critically with existing research, and contribute their ideas to ongoing academic conversations (Lunsford & Connors, 2013). Furthermore, strong writing skills are invaluable beyond academia and research institutions, preparing writers for careers that require clear, concise, and persuasive communication.



Within academic writing, different genres, like research papers, literature reviews, or lab reports, each serve specific goals and utilise distinct rhetorical moves – strategic actions writers take to achieve those goals. According to Swales (1990), genres are "sets of communicative events that share some of the same communicative purposes" (p. 34).

This paper explores the key elements of effective academic writing, including proper citation methods, argument development, and structure. Through practical tips and examples, it aims to empower authors to write with confidence and clarity, ensuring their voices are heard within the academic discourse.

## **The foundational elements of writing**

Effective academic writing rests on three pillars: a strong thesis statement, robust research strategies, and a solid grasp of citation styles. It is crucial to focus on these pillars before embarking on your research journey.

### **Developing a strong thesis statement**

A thesis statement is a concise sentence that encapsulates the central argument that a writer aims to present in their work. It acts as a strategy, guiding the writer and the readers through the analysis and evidence to support a claim. A strong thesis is clear, concise, and specific. It avoids broad generalisations and focuses on a debatable claim supported with evidence throughout the writing (Raimes, 2009). A well-crafted thesis statement possesses several key qualities: clarity, focus, debatability, and relevance. By understanding these characteristics and employing effective strategies, writers can ensure their arguments are clear, compelling, and well-supported.

A strong thesis statement should be readily understood by the reader. Thus, a writer should avoid vague language and overly broad topics. Instead, s/he should use specific terms that accurately reflect the central idea of their text. For instance, instead of stating "Social media has an impact," a clearer thesis might be "While social media platforms connect individuals and foster communities, their addictive nature can negatively impact mental health" (Smith, 2023). This revised statement pinpoints the specific social media impact you intend to explore. Also, consider the impact of social media on mental health. A weak thesis statement might be: "Social media affects mental health." This statement is too broad and lacks a specific argument. A stronger, more focused thesis could be: "While social media platforms offer opportunities for connection, excessive use can contribute to feelings of anxiety and depression among young adults due to factors such as social comparison and the pressure to curate a perfect online persona." This latter thesis is specific, debatable, and concise and previews the key points addressed in the text.

Focus is equally important. A strong thesis tackles a single, manageable aspect of a broader topic. In this regard, a writer should consider the essay length and ensure their chosen angle can be adequately addressed within the allotted word count. For example, if writing about the South Sudan Civil War, a focused thesis might be "General Garang's strategic use of flanking manoeuvres proved to be a decisive factor in the party victory at the Juba". This statement isolates a specific aspect of the Civil War for in-depth analysis. Further, a strong thesis presents an argument that can be reasonably contested. Statements of fact lack the persuasive element crucial for an academic text. For instance, "The world is round" is not debatable. However, "The increasing popularity of electric vehicles will significantly reduce global carbon emissions by 2030" (Chen, 2024) – presents a debatable claim that can be supported with evidence.



Finally, a strong thesis is relevant to the essay prompt or overall topic. It should address the question and provide a clear direction for the subsequent discussion. A good writer should ensure their thesis aligns with the text's purpose and scope. Straying from the core theme will confuse the reader and weaken the argument. The importance of a strong thesis statement cannot be overstated. It acts as a compass for one's writing, ensuring the writers stay on track and effectively develop their arguments. It also provides a clear direction for the reader, allowing them to follow the logical progression of ideas.

## Locating credible sources

Academic writing thrives on evidence. To construct a convincing argument, you must rely on credible sources supporting your claims. These include scholarly journals, peer-reviewed articles, books by established authors, and reputable online resources. Thus, the first step in academic writing lies in identifying reliable sources. Look for publications from reputable institutions and those authored by recognised experts in the field. Credible websites often have a clearly defined "About Us" section outlining their mission and editorial team. Be wary of websites with anonymous authors, biased language, or those laden with advertisements.

Evaluating source credibility goes beyond origin. Consider the currency of the information since outdated research might not reflect current understanding in a rapidly evolving field. The writer must also consider the publication date and ensure it aligns with the research objective. Also, the purpose of the source should be assessed whether it is intended for a general audience or for academicians. Scholarly articles delve deeper into a subject, providing a more comprehensive analysis than popular media articles.

Always record bibliographic information meticulously. Include author names, publication date, title, and source details (e.g., journal name, website URL). This meticulousness ensures proper citation and helps the writer and the reader revisit the source if needed. As you take notes from other sources, distinguish between your ideas and those gleaned from other sources. Use quotation marks for verbatim excerpts and paraphrase extensively to avoid plagiarism (Griffiths, 2022).

## Citation Styles (e.g. APA, MLA, Chicago)

Citation styles provide a standardised way to acknowledge sources used in writing. Three prevalent styles include APA (American Psychological Association), MLA (Modern Language Association), and Chicago. Each style has specific guidelines for formatting citations within the text (in-text citations) and at the end of your work (reference list). Different fields use specific citation styles. Here below is a brief description of the three aforementioned referencing styles.

- *APA (American Psychological Association)*: Widely used in social sciences, education, and psychology. APA style focuses on in-text citations using author names and publication year, followed by a full reference list at the end of the paper.
- *MLA (Modern Language Association)*: This style is widely preferred for humanities disciplines like literature, language studies, and film. It uses parenthetical in-text citations with the author's name and page number and a Works Cited list at the end.
- *Chicago (Chicago Manual of Style)*: Favoured in history, law, and arts and humanities, the Chicago style features a combination of footnotes and a bibliography at the end.

While the specific format may vary, the core purpose of citation remains the same: to provide accurate and verifiable references that allow readers to trace your arguments and explore the sources you used. Understanding and adhering to a specific citation style demonstrates professionalism and



facilitates further research for your readers. Proper citations demonstrate the breadth and depth of your research, lending credibility to your work and ensuring proper attribution of ideas.

Generally, citation styles promote consistency. The standardised formats allow for clear and easy communication within a particular field. Understanding and applying citation styles goes beyond simply following a set of rules. It signifies a commitment to intellectual honesty and fosters a collaborative spirit within academia. By giving credit where credit is due, we ensure that knowledge continues to build upon itself, generation after generation.

## **Constructing a Cohesive Paper**

A well-constructed academic paper is a powerful tool for conveying complex ideas and arguments. Cohesion, the seamless connection between its parts, is vital for ensuring clarity and guiding the reader through your analysis. This section explores the anatomy of an academic paper, focusing on crafting effective body paragraphs and utilising transition strategies for a logical flow.

### *The Anatomy of an Academic Paper*

Understanding the anatomy of an academic paper, particularly its core sections and their functions, is crucial for both readers and writers. An academic paper typically follows a three-part structure (Park, 2021). The three essential components of an academic paper, the introduction, body paragraphs, and conclusion, are dissected here, highlighting their roles in guiding the reader through the research journey.

#### *Introduction paragraphs*

The introduction sets the stage by introducing the topic, providing necessary background information, and culminating in a clear thesis statement. This statement encapsulates the writer's central argument and serves as a guide for the paper (Swales & Feak, 1990). This part usually begins by capturing the reader's attention with a captivating hook, often a surprising statistic, a thought-provoking question, or a relevant anecdote (American Psychological Association, 2020). This is followed by background information that establishes the context of the research topic. Here, the author briefly reviews existing knowledge on the subject, highlighting gaps or controversies. A well-crafted introduction culminates in the thesis statement, a concise sentence that clearly outlines the central argument or contribution of the paper (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). In this paper, paragraphs have been clipped from the works of Deumert, Panović, Agyepong & Barasa (2019), and Mohr & Barasa (2024) to illustrate the three types of paragraphs. Here below is an example of an introductory paragraph:

Researchers have concentrated their statistical analyses on web pages and the language they represent when estimating online language presence. This was the approach of the Language Observatory Project (Japan), which, in 2006, used a web crawler in its 'African Web Survey'. The results are a striking illustration of what Prado calls an 'online deficit': less than one per cent of webpages with African domain names were found to be written in African languages. More up-to-date information is available from W3Techs ([www.w3techs.com](http://www.w3techs.com)), a company specialising in internet surveys. Of interest to linguists are their statistics regarding the languages used on the top ten million websites (each of which includes a collection of web pages). Of the over 170 languages listed, more than two dozen are African languages, which suggests some degree of (global) visibility and representation. Yet, simultaneously, the *number* of websites using African languages remains very low at the time of writing (January 2017), even for languages such as Kiswahili and Lingala. (Deumert, Panović, Agyepong & Barasa, 2019: 581).



## *Body paragraphs*

The body paragraphs form the heart of the text's argument. Each paragraph should focus on a single point that supports the thesis. Ideally, these points should be logically ordered, building upon each other to create a compelling case. The body paragraphs present the evidence and develop the argument. This can be illustrated as follows:

The partition of Africa was accompanied by fundamental changes to existing practices of education and literacy. Earlier systems were discarded and replaced with European models using the Latin script. While education has been predominantly geared towards a single language, usually the (now former) colonial language since this time, three further phases of multilingual education have coexisted with more dominant monolingual European-based systems (Deumert, Panović, Agyepong & Barasa, 2019: 582).

## *Conclusion paragraphs*

The conclusion restates the thesis in a new light, summarises the key points, and offers final thoughts or implications of the research (Creswell, 2018). It serves as the final piece of the puzzle. It reiterates the paper's main points, reminding the reader of the key takeaways and the significance of the research. An example of a conclusion paragraph is cited below:

Hence, the multilingual sociolinguistic context of East Africa plays a central role in future language policies. As Kembo Sure (2020, p. 8) puts it, 'As long as monolingualism is assumed to be the only natural order of things, we shall continue to have unresolved language disputes. Accounting for this multilingualism in ways in line with African conceptualisations of society and identity is desirable. As mentioned, translanguaging is common in East Africa's higher education despite English-only policies (Makalela, 2016; Riley, 2021). Thus, we suggest language policies for higher education in East Africa, which allow for the possibility to draw on the full range of students' linguistic repertoires, including English. This might ultimately be the solution for reconciling regionalisation and internationalisation, which is important for higher education institutions in East Africa and beyond. (Mohr & Barasa, 2024: 308).

The conclusion may also offer future research directions or highlight the findings' broader implications. A strong conclusion leaves the reader with a sense of closure and a deeper understanding of the topic under investigation.

## *Transition Strategies*

Effective writing hinges on guiding readers through a journey of ideas. This journey requires clear connections between thoughts, ensuring a smooth and logical flow. Transition strategies serve as the bridges that connect these ideas, promoting coherence and fostering a deeper understanding of the writer's message. In essence, one of the primary functions of transitions is to signal the relationship between sentences and paragraphs. Transitional words and phrases act as cues, informing readers about the intended direction of the writing. For instance, transitions "furthermore" or "additionally" indicate the introduction of a supporting point, while "however" or "conversely" introduce a contrasting viewpoint (Boyce & McKinney, 2018). The choice of transition words depends on the specific relationship between ideas. Other common categories include transitions for summarising ideas (e.g., in conclusion, to summarise) and sequencing ideas (e.g., first, second, subsequently).

Beyond signalling relationships, transitions also serve to emphasise specific ideas. Words like "indeed" or "in essence" highlight the importance of a preceding statement, while phrases like "for example" or "to illustrate" introduce specific instances to support a broader point (Hacker, 2016). This targeted emphasis allows writers to draw the reader's attention to key aspects of their arguments. Transitions also enhance the flow of writing by creating a sense of continuity. Imagine a presentation with abrupt



shifts between slides – it would be jarring and difficult to follow. Similarly, writing without transitions can feel disjointed and impede reader engagement. Transitions, by contrast, create a smooth progression between ideas, allowing readers to navigate the text effortlessly.

Though transitional words act as linguistic bridges, guiding readers smoothly between ideas and ensuring a logical flow of thought, their misuse can create confusion and impede comprehension. One frequent misuse involves choosing the wrong word for the intended connection. For instance, using "however" to introduce an idea that strengthens the previous point is incorrect. "In addition to" or "furthermore" would be more suitable. Similarly, using "consequently" when the following idea is simply a result, not a logical consequence, creates a misleading cause-and-effect relationship. A simpler transition like "then" or "next" might suffice in such cases. Further, while transitional words serve a valuable purpose, cramming a paragraph with them can make the writing feel clunky and laboured. Strong paragraphs often flow naturally, with the logic of the argument guiding the reader's understanding. In such cases, relying solely on transition words becomes unnecessary (Hacker, 2021). Finally, using transitions to introduce irrelevant information disrupts the paragraph's focus. Transition words should connect ideas that contribute to the central theme. Irrelevant details, even if introduced with a transition word, become distractions and should be omitted or placed elsewhere in the text (McMurrey et al., 2020).

Developing strong transition skills requires practice and a keen awareness of the relationships between ideas. Writers can refine their usage by revising drafts with an eye toward flow and coherence. By strategically employing transitions, you create a cohesive and logical flow throughout your paper, ensuring a clear and compelling argument for your reader.

## **Language and Style in Academic Writing**

Academic writing demands specific tools to effectively convey complex ideas and research findings. Language and style play a crucial role in achieving clarity, formality, and objectivity, which are features of successful academic communication. This section will explore the key language and style characteristics underpinning effective academic writing.

### ***Formal Language and Avoiding Colloquialisms***

Language is a versatile tool, capable of conveying complex ideas through a spectrum of formality. Academic writing employs a formal register, distinct from everyday speech. This means avoiding contractions (e.g., "don't" becomes "do not"), slang (e.g., "awesome" becomes "excellent"), and informal expressions (e.g., "you know" is omitted). Slang terms and informal expressions are omitted for precise and unambiguous vocabulary. Formal language fosters a sense of seriousness and objectivity, which is essential in scholarly discourse (McMillan, 2019).

Formal language fosters clarity and precision. It utilises vocabulary with well-defined meanings, minimising ambiguity and ensuring the intended message is accurately received. For instance, instead of saying, "This thing is great," a formal approach might be used, such as, "This particular concept demonstrates exceptional merit" (Walker, 2020). This conveys the positive evaluation and specifies the "concept" being praised. Furthermore, formal language employs varied sentence structures. For instance, complex sentences with dependent and independent clauses allow for the introduction of nuanced arguments and the establishment of logical relationships between ideas. Juxtapose this with the simplicity of a colloquial statement like "Yeah, that makes sense." A formal alternative, like "Indeed, the proposition aligns with established principles," agrees while demonstrating a more sophisticated understanding.

Formal language also prioritises objectivity. It minimises the use of personal pronouns ("I," "you") and subjective adverbs ("very," "extremely"). This impersonal approach emphasises the ideas, fostering a



sense of neutrality and credibility. Consider the difference between "This research is super important" and "This investigation holds significant ramifications." The latter removes informality and emphasises the research's potential impact.

While colloquialisms serve a purpose in casual conversation, they can detract from the professionalism and seriousness of formal communication. Slang terms, with their constantly evolving nature and potential for ambiguity, can be easily misunderstood. Avoiding colloquialisms does not necessitate sacrificing clarity. There are always formal synonyms readily available. For instance, "a bunch of" can be replaced with "a multitude of," and "mess up" can be rendered as "impede progress."

### ***Precise vocabulary, technical Terms and active voice***

This sub-section presents the crucial role of precise vocabulary, technical terminology, and active voice in achieving clear and impactful communication. It argues that meticulous word choice enhances the accuracy and conciseness of the message, while the strategic use of technical terms facilitates communication within specific domains. Additionally, the sub-section emphasises the importance of active voice in fostering a direct and engaging writing style.

Precise vocabulary ensures the intended meaning is conveyed without ambiguity. This may involve using technical terms specific to the discipline. For instance, a psychology paper might utilise terms like "cognitive dissonance" or "operant conditioning" (APA Dictionary of Psychology, 2020). However, it is important to strike a balance. Overusing jargon can alienate readers unfamiliar with the field. Explain technical terms in clear language upon first use (Swales & Feak, 1990).

The appropriate use of active voice contributes to clarity and conciseness in academic writing. Active voice sentences highlight the subject's acting, making the writing more engaging for the reader (University of York, 2019). Here is an example:

- Passive voice: "The theory was proposed by Barasa (2024)."
- Active voice: "Barasa (2024) proposed the theory."

The active voice often strengthens the sentence structure and emphasises the subject performing the action. However, there are situations where the passive voice might be more suitable, such as when the focus is on the action itself or when the doer is unknown.

Academic writing also benefits from a strong vocabulary. Using precise and domain-specific terms demonstrates the writer's knowledge and understanding of the subject matter. However, it is crucial to avoid overly complex words if simpler alternatives convey the same meaning effectively.

### ***Sentence Structure and Clarity***

Academic writing typically favours concise sentences that directly convey the intended message. Sentences should be well-constructed and easy to understand, avoiding unnecessary jargon or overly complex sentence structures. Complex sentences, while permissible, should be used sparingly and only when they enhance clarity (Strunk Jr. & White, 2000). Furthermore, careful attention to grammar is essential. Subject-verb agreement, punctuation, or tense errors can impede comprehension and undermine the writer's credibility. A good writer should strive to express ideas in a direct and focused manner. They should eliminate redundancies and unnecessary phrases.

### **Additional Skills**

Mastering the mechanics of writing is crucial, but to truly excel in the academic domain, you must cultivate additional skills. Ethical sourcing, effective evidence integration, and critical thinking abilities are essential tools for crafting compelling and impactful academic work. By developing these



skills, you'll transform from a passive conveyor of information to a critical thinker with a unique voice that contributes meaningfully to the academic conversation.

While mastering the mechanics of grammar and syntax is essential, truly impactful writing requires additional skills that elevate your arguments and position you as a thoughtful contributor to your field. This section explores three crucial aspects beyond the basic building blocks of academic writing: avoiding plagiarism, effectively integrating evidence, and developing critical thinking skills.

### ***Avoiding Plagiarism***

Plagiarism is using another person's ideas or words without proper attribution. Plagiarism encompasses verbatim copying of another's work and failing to acknowledge paraphrased or borrowed ideas (MacIntyre & Gardner, 2016). By understanding the different types of plagiarism and familiarising oneself with proper citation methods, such as the APA style, authors can ensure their work reflects their original thought process while giving due credit to the sources that inform it.

Understanding proper citation practices is key to ethical sourcing. The APA referencing style, as discussed above, for example, dictates how to cite in-text and create a reference list at the end of your paper. Mastering these allows you to integrate others' work while giving due credit seamlessly. Tools like plagiarism checkers can help identify accidental plagiarism, but a true understanding of the source and proper paraphrasing techniques are essential.

### ***Integrating Evidence Effectively***

Academic writing relies heavily on evidence to support claims. However, simply incorporating a quote is not enough. Effective integration requires understanding what evidence strengthens your argument. Integrating evidence effectively strengthens the persuasive power of your arguments. This involves seamlessly weaving quotes, paraphrases, and in-text citations into your writing. Direct quotes should be used sparingly, often highlighting particularly insightful or impactful passages from credible sources (American Psychological Association, 2020). Paraphrasing allows you to synthesise ideas while maintaining the original meaning. It requires understanding the source material and conveying its essence in your own words. Both direct quotes and paraphrases require in-text citations that direct readers to the corresponding entry in the reference list.

Strategic use of quotes, paraphrasing, and in-text citations showcases your ability to analyse sources and weave them into your narrative. For example, instead of simply stating, "Economic inequality is a major social issue," you could reference a study to strengthen your claim: "A recent report by the World Inequality Lab (2021) found that the richest 1% of the global population now owns more wealth than the rest of the world combined." This approach demonstrates your understanding of the issue and adds credibility to your argument.

### ***Analysis, Evaluation, and Forming Arguments***

Academic writing is not just about regurgitating facts from available sources. It is about fostering critical thinking and analysis. Effective writing involves dissecting evidence, evaluating its strengths and weaknesses, and formulating arguments based on your findings.

Critical thinking requires you to go beyond surface-level comprehension. Consider opposing viewpoints, identify potential biases in your sources, and assess the validity of their claims. This process allows you to form a well-rounded understanding of the topic and develop your unique perspective.





Building upon your analysis, you can construct a clear and concise argument supported by credible evidence. This argument should be debatable, not simply factual, and should spark further discussion within the field.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, once a seemingly opaque domain, academic writing can be mastered through a clear understanding of its core principles. This paper has provided the tools to navigate the discourse by exploring common genres, rhetorical strategies, and essential skills. By wielding these effectively, a writer can comprehend complex academic texts and craft insightful contributions. Ideally, academic writing is a journey of exploration and engagement. The good news is that academic writing is a skill that can be continuously improved. A writer must utilise resources such as writing workshops, online guides, feedback from experienced authors, and other evolving and emerging sources to refine his/her craft.

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