

SUCCESSFUL ACADEMIC WRITING

**A Complete Guide for Social
and Behavioral Scientists**

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UNIT I

BECOMING AN ACADEMIC WRITER

CHAPTER 1

What Is Academic Writing?

Academic writing in the behavioral and social sciences is a way of writing that is *distinctly different* from other forms of writing. On the surface, it may appear to have similarities with other types of writing, but the more you learn about it, the more you realize that just about every aspect of academic writing, from purpose to tone, from structure to style, and from audience to word choice, is different. Quite literally, academic writing is more than just another way to write; it is a different culture with its own language.

So, how do you learn academic writing? This is the question that guides this book. We believe that the basic equation for any kind of learning is awareness + action = growth. In your case, this means we believe you will experience positive development as an academic writer if you do the following:

1. Develop *awareness* of academic writing—that is, develop factual knowledge about it as a culture and a language.
2. Take *action* to increase your membership in the academic writing culture and your fluency in academic writing language—that is, consciously and diligently do things that improve your skills and strategies for accomplishing academic writing at a level that is satisfactory for accomplishing your goals.

Accordingly, in this book, our goal is to provide you with a balance of *awareness* (knowledge) and *action* (skill/strategy development steps) in an effort to facilitate growth in your academic writing. Our belief is that expertise in anything—but especially something as specific as academic writing—is primarily a result of extensive practice. As Malcolm Gladwell engagingly illustrates in *Outliers: The Story of Success* (2008), it is 10,000

hours of practice, rather than just inherent ability, that to some extent distinguishes a “phenom” from others in a field. Of course, we do not expect you to make 10,000 hours of practice in academic writing your goal. We just want to emphasize that all time spent *understanding and practicing* academic writing will result in increasing your academic writing expertise.

In this first chapter, our **awareness focus** is helping you to gain an understanding of what academic writing *is*—and what academic writing is *not*. Our **action focus** includes ideas for steps you can take to consciously develop your ability to see written texts through the eyes of an academic writer. Let’s begin by exploring what academic writing *is* and is *not* in more detail.

DEFINING ACADEMIC WRITING

Academic writing is more than just another way to write; it is literally a different culture with its own language. In fact, academic writing is more than just one different culture. It is simultaneously one culture and many cultures, which can obviously create confusion for those trying to join the culture(s) and learn the language(s). Academic writing is one culture in the sense that most experienced, successful academic writers (from the same country) would likely agree on several of the general qualities of academic writing. However, academic writing is also many cultures because those same experienced, successful academic writers would also likely look at the same academically written text and provide very different comments and suggestions for revisions based on what is considered the norm in their specific discipline. Thus, even people like your professors, who operate very successfully within the culture and language of academic writing, may have a difficult time of breaking down what is and what is not academic writing in explicit terms, because it is not one thing. It is many things, and they did not *learn* it—they *absorbed* it. Right now, if you were to schedule a meeting with your favorite professor and ask her to define what academic writing is, you might get some vague answers like the following:

- “It is what we use in writing journal articles.”
- “You know academic writing when you see it.”
- “You know what is *not* academic writing when you see it.”
- “Academic writing is formal, neutral language.”

Of course, the confusing thing about these types of responses is that they do not really answer your question. You still do not know what academic writing is, and as far as you can tell at this point, neither does your professor. So, how are you supposed to figure out how to do academic writing when you do not know what it is? Perhaps you should ask your

professor another question, such as, “How did you learn academic writing?” This time, you may get more concrete responses:

- “I had to learn academic writing on my own.”
- “I learned academic writing when I was working on my dissertation.”
- “Academic writing was really varied according to my professors. I picked up a little something from each professor I worked with in graduate school.”
- “I am still learning what academic writing is—it seems to change according to journal, colleague, and discipline!”

Although these answers may also seem unhelpful, you can begin to understand that professors have difficulty defining what academic writing is because they likely experienced very little direct instruction in developing themselves as academic writers. Like you, they were expected to produce academic writing that met some mysterious standard defined by their professors, and somehow (they may not know how) they managed to achieve that standard.

The journey to becoming an academic writer is unique and highly individualized for everyone, and inevitably involves some strategic planning, some trial and error, and lots of perseverance. Thus the first major awareness that can help move you forward in your own process of becoming an academic writer is to understand that you are in charge of this journey. It will ultimately be up to you to direct your own process of becoming an academic writer and to figure out what works for you. The key action that can help you to take charge of your journey is to be curious. Curiosity will lead you not only to notice things you need to notice in your journey to becoming an academic writer, but also to seek explanations, resources, and assistance as you manage your journey. For example, curiosity will help you to develop the ability to see written texts as experienced academic writers see them, and this is a crucial step in your process of becoming an academic writer.

ACADEMIC WRITING VERSUS OTHER TYPES OF WRITING

Is a magazine article academic writing? Is a newspaper editorial academic writing? Is an advertising brochure academic writing? What about a blog post? Text message? Tweet? Is an office memo academic writing? A recipe . . . e-mail . . . message taped to your door . . . or a to-do list? We think you get our point. Chances are you said “No” to all of the above. If so, you are generally correct. Each of those types of writing is common—so

common you may read and/or write them every day—but none of them are academic writing.

At the same time, academic writing is not a single type of text. The categorization of something as academic writing generally means that the something in question shares a specific combination of features that are considered representative of the term *academic*. In what might be considered “good” academic writing, these features include but are not limited to the following:

- *Audience awareness.* The intended or imagined audience or reader for the text is clearly envisioned as having some shared knowledge about the content.
- *Argumentative purpose.* The purpose of the text is to argue an overall position or point of view about a topic that is in some way new or unique by demonstrating knowledge about the topic and ability to use that knowledge.
- *Problematizing approach.* The overall position or point of view on a topic typically presents previous positions or points of view as problematic in some way, even when those previous positions or points of view may have been long accepted as common knowledge. The goal of such an approach is generally to create a rationale for considering the topic from new or alternative points of view.
- *Rational tone.* The writer of the text assumes the reader will be either appeased or persuaded by the obvious and carefully explained logic of the argument.
- *Relevant content.* The text includes only academically credible information that is relevant to supporting and forwarding the writer’s argument or discrediting information that does not support the writer’s argument.
- *Coherent structure.* Regardless of the relative length of the text, it must follow a precise organizational plan on a macro-level, as in the case of the organization of an academic research article, and on a meso-level, as in the case of a single paragraph of an academic research article. The academic coherence is reflected in the way ideas are introduced and broken down for further discussion. In academic writing, ideas are introduced categorically, from general categories to more specific categories to even more specific instances of those categories.
- *Cohesive style.* The writer assumes more or less complete responsibility for the reader’s understanding of his ideas and uses linguistic devices such as repetition of key words, parallel structure, transition words or expressions, and a sophisticated variety of synonyms or metaphors to create writing that tightly connects ideas, leaving little