

WRITING ACROSS THE CURRICULUM

From the Writing Instructors at the Academic Support Center

No matter what your major is, you will be asked to write academic papers for a variety of audiences in a variety of formats, especially in the 3 main disciplines: humanities (literature, art, music, history), the social sciences (psychology, anthropology, sociology), and the physical sciences (biology, physics, chemistry).

Each field has its own topics, preferred types of evidence, language uses, and citation conventions, but they all share expectations for good writing.

There are certain commonalities across the disciplines that once acknowledged, will make it easier to sort out the differences for each field.

COMMONALITIES OF ACADEMIC WRITING

- In all disciplines, scholars write about texts (art works, case studies, or lab data).
- They have a clearly stated claim or thesis, clearly stating the paper's purpose.
- Include previous research conducted by peers in the field.
- Respond to that research in a way that promotes development within the field.
- Present evidence that supports your claim or thesis.
- Be mindful of your audience.
- Present your research in language and with a structure that best suits your argument.
- Document evidence and ideas of others.

Regardless of the discipline, academic writing tries to create some kind of change in the reader and sometimes even in the field itself. Your purpose as an academic writer is to contribute something to the existing data. In academic writing, decide on your purpose and know your audience. Narrow the topic so it can be adequately covered in the given space. And finally, draft a tentative thesis.

The thesis statement- This states the point you are trying to make or the stance you are taking about a topic area, and it should mention briefly the reasons that readers should accept your position. It refers to the argument that runs through the entire essay, and anything that does not relate to your thesis does not belong in your paper. You may well have to refine your thesis after drafting your paper and discovering new ideas.

The essay draft- Consider the style conventions of the particular academic discipline, the kinds of evidence needed, and the particular audience. Then draft an introduction that clearly states the purpose and main idea of the paper. Next, draft the body of the paper which will elaborate each of the subpoints you are using to support your argument. The argument is held together by logical and linguistic connections, resulting in part from solid evidence as well as smooth sentence and paragraph transitions. Finally, in the conclusion, show in a powerful way why your readers should accept your position or findings. You might leave them with a final thought, suggest an action you want them to take, or spark their interest in further study.

Argument- This is the most common mode of academic writing. It often includes a rebuttal to possible counter-arguments.

Some types of papers you will write in the various disciplines do not have as their purpose adding new findings and ideas to the existing knowledge. You might be asked to summarize or analyze the writings of other scholars. Summary is used in all kinds of academic writing and is a means of restating and explaining what another writer has written. It can clarify your own understanding of a piece of writing or a set of data, and it can be used as supporting evidence for your position.

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DIFFERENCES IN WRITING FOR VARIOUS DISCIPLINES

When writing in a specific discipline, start by becoming familiar with the distinctive features of the writing in that field of study.

-Jargon- One of the first things you may notice is each field's unique way of using language: Become familiar with a discipline's language conventions, as each field has a specialized vocabulary. One of the ways academic writers display competence in the particular area is by using such language well. For example, computer scientists might refer to "loop invariants" to describe programming methods.

-Authorship- In some disciplines, a scholarly written work is usually collaborative, such as in the physical sciences and technology fields; in others, such as in the humanities, it is usually individual.

-Research- The meaning and practice of research varies, depending upon the academic field. In the humanities, research generally means investigating pre-existing sources and studying them in light of previous research, then responding with a new theory or analysis. The physical sciences, and sometimes the social sciences, tend to rely on new experiments or studies that produce data. Research Protocol and Materials and Methods are included in the published work. Various databases of peer-reviewed journal material is available for each of the disciplines. The university library website can provide links to the databases you choose.

-Source Citation and Documentation- In any discipline, you must give credit to those whose ideas or words you have borrowed. Each discipline, however, follows a particular system of citation. Humanities writers generally use MLA; social sciences writers use APA; history writers use Chicago; physical sciences use CSE.

-Structure and Visual Conventions- Different disciplines have different formatting traditions (titles, headings, subheads, margin size, font size, graphics, captions, page numbers). Use the manuscript format recommended for your discipline, as listed above. In business courses, you will create documents used in professional settings, templates of which are available online.