Academic Writing

Assignments and Papers for Part-time Students and Busy Academics

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Abstract
Academic writing presents a number of challenges for part-time students and academics snowed under by lecturing obligations. Reading and classes consume an appreciable amount of either group's time, with no attendant relaxation in work and family commitments. Improving the efficiency of one's academic output is therefore a valuable skill to acquire. This paper gives advice in three areas, and provides a method for writing short academic literature that has been derived from accumulated experience and contemporary thinking.

Keywords
Academic writing, academic assignments, short academic papers

Introduction

According to Murray (2005) in her useful and insightful book, writing skills are not automatically conferred on the author by schooling or careers. Academic authors have to grapple with challenging subject matter and exacting logic; all whilst contending with the field's rhetoric, accepted language and writing style, required format, critical thinking and the need to cite and reference correctly. Academic writing is more art than science.

Art however has its limitations. Most academic authors' primary objective is to write about their subject, not demonstrate writing prowess. Discovering efficient writing skills takes time, so this paper offers a simple method for preparing academic papers and student assignments. The proposed process intentionally formulaic, offering a reliable systemic model to reuse, learn from and build upon. This may limit creativity[1], so the process should be used as a guide rather than as a prescriptive method; adapted liberally to suit individual style, situation, topic and requirements.

The complexity of writing is not to be underestimated, so this paper is intended to whet appetites, alert novice writers, and complement rather than replace comprehensive texts. Three areas will be covered in this introduction; expectations, the structure of the paper and the preparation method.

Readers are encouraged to engage with general literature such as Murray (2005), focused papers such as Gopen and Swan (1990), and a companion paper on critical thinking (Onions, 2009). This theoretical knowledge may then be improved, by application to the process of writing, and by analysing published papers for style and critical thinking.

Expectations and the quality of writing

Academic literature is produced for a reason; including publishing of research, earning grades, career progression, revealing problems or contributing to knowledge (Murray, 2005, p14). Authors write for an audience, and that audience has expectations. Grades received, acceptance for publication, or a paper's influence will depend on meeting these expectations.

Only two or three people will usually read assignments. This audience will have very specific requirements; including answering the assignment questions, adhering to instructions, use of proper referencing, revealing knowledge of that particular subject, and demonstrating an ability to write and think.

Conference and journal articles are also written for specific audiences, although there may be different groups represented with different expectations. This audience will be looking for new and interesting knowledge, clear communication of ideas, evidence to support claims made, and rigid adherence to formatting and referencing standards.

These audiences will also share more general expectations. Critical thinking, a logic and lucid argument, good understanding of current thinking, relevance and accuracy are always important. Grammar, punctuation and spelling may have little impact on the validity of arguments or underlying research, but they distract the reader and indicate poor attention to detail.

[1] Experience indicates that most novelty in student writing appears to be achieved by accident rather than by design.

Writing a paper may be viewed as a process of convincingly communicating an argument and its substantiation to an audience. Metcalfe (2003) sees the argument as a fundamental format for research. This paper will treat the argument as the basic yardstick for measuring the quality of the contents of a paper.

Writers may also wish to consider the following 'measures', and the relationship between them, the method employed to write a paper and the output of the method (the paper itself):

- Clarity
- Completion
- Critical
- Currency
- Readability
- Soundness of argument
- Relevance
- Simplicity
- Structure
- Substance

These dimensions of quality are not quantitative. In many cases it may not be possible to quantify dimensions, and in other cases the quantification will be contextual. In all cases however the writer needs to identify up front the standards and expectations of their audience. Failure to meet expectations will far outweigh the value of arguments and ideas contained within.

Writers are therefore advised to remember their audience's expectations throughout the preparation of a paper, and then evaluate the paper in terms of those expectations before submission.

The structure of the paper

Describing the argument as the primary construct underpinning an academic paper should steer the author towards communicating their ideas in a way that flows well and convinces the reader. There are certain conventions that help structure the argument in a manner that is familiar to the reader, and hence improve its ability to communicate and persuade.

A reliable and often-used structure for papers and dissertation is the "*standard conversation*"; such as described by O'Leary (2004, p208; 2005, p39-60), McNiff and Whitehead (2006) and Yin (2003). This is a hypothetical conversation between a reader or examiner asking questions, and the writer answering them. O'Leary's presentation of the standard conversation (2004, p208, table 13.1) is noteworthy in its usefulness, and this has been amended slightly in Table 1 below to include some housekeeping.

The questions	Answers that structure chapters or sections
Tell me what your research is about?	Title Abstract Introduction • Research question/s • Hypothesis or position (as appropriate)
And why did you choose this particular topic/question?	Introduction • Rationale
What do you hope to achieve?	Introduction • Aims and objectives
I really don't know much about this; can you fill me in?	Background/literature review • Recent and prior research (literature review) • Theory (current and seminal) • Context (social, cultural, historic and other)
How exactly did you go about doing your research?	Research design/approach • Methodological approach • Methods • Limitations
And what did you find out?	Findings/results/emergent story • Text, tables, graphs, themes, quotes • Discussion, analysis, interpretation, meaning
How would you explain the relevance/importance of what you've done?	Conclusion • Implications • Significance • Recommendations (especially applied research)
What literature informed you?	References Citations

Table 1. O'Leary's standard conversation amended

By separately introducing the problem, reviewing the literature, proposing a method, examining data and interpreting findings, authors are presenting the argument in a palatable and familiar way.

This is not the only structure available. Students may have to follow a stipulated format, or find that a review, report or theoretical position may be more appropriate. Analysis of a dozen papers randomly selected from journals reveals some alternatives to the standard conversation, presented in table 2 below.

The structure should reflect the argument, and signpost the argument using appropriate headings. Some authors use generic headings, such as the above, others use subject or discussion related headings. Ultimately, the writer should find a balance between familiarity and creativity.

Structure	Sections
Theoretical paper or review	• Title • Abstract • Introduction / rationale • Theoretical or logical discussion, or literature review • Conclusions, hypothesis or summary • References
Opinion	• Title • Discussion • Conclusions
Research proposal	• Title • Abstract • Rationale for the research • Literature review • Hypothesis or problem statement • Proposed research methodology • References
Case study	• Title • Abstract • Introduction, rationale and theory • Case study description • Analysis and discussion • Conclusions • References
Report	• Summary or abstract • Introduction • Body • Conclusions • Recommendations • References • Appendices
Essay	• Introduction • Discussion • Conclusion • References

Table 2. Alternative structures for papers

A systemic method of preparing academic papers

The key contribution of this paper is a practical, systemic and defined process that guides the writer through a series of steps to producing a quality paper.

The method proposed here has been derived from reflection on personal experience, and from a review of the referenced literature. It is not intended to be prescriptive; writers may adapt and adopt to suit their style and the subject.

- Prepare
  - Identify the subject, topic or theme
  - Identify the problem or objective
  - Identify expectations and instructions
  - Read broad literature, identifying key theory and general viewpoints
  - Consider empirical research and available data
- Build the argument
  - Review literature
  - Build a mind map or notes of theories, positions and claims
  - Analyse, compare and correlate the theory
  - Consider how the problem may be described
  - Consider the hypothesis
  - Formulate the argument between the problem and the hypothesis
  - Use an argument map or series of points to structure the argument
  - Inform assumptions, premises or inferences in the argument with theory or logic
  - Review the argument to ensure its validity
- Commence writing up
  - Select or prepare the document template
  - Choose an outline structure for the paper
  - Write up introduction
  - Write up the literature review, using the argument to guide discussion
- Define the research
  - Select research logic (deductive, inductive)
  - Identify the evidence needed to prove the hypothesis, support the argument or derive a theory from
  - Consider how that evidence may be acquired
  - Select a suitable research method
  - Identify how that evidence may be examined
  - Select a suitable analytic technique
  - Design the empirical research instruments
  - Write up the methodology
- Conduct research
  - Pilot and review the research method
  - Apply method, conduct empirical research
  - Write up method and results
- Analyse
  - Critically analyse data
  - Prepare descriptive and inferential findings
  - Write up findings
- Understand
  - Critically evaluate / reflect on findings
  - Compare and contrast findings with research questions or hypotheses
  - Compare and contrast findings with theory
  - Draw conclusions that answer research questions or hypotheses, or develop an inductive theory
  - Write up conclusions
- Validate
  - Inspect argument for validity
  - Inspect findings for validity
  - Inspect conclusions for validity
  - Assess and write up limitations

- Housekeeping
  - Write up references (an ongoing task)
  - Write up abstract and title
  - Proofread
- Review
  - Assess whether the paper meets requirements or answers the questions
  - Assess whether expectations will be met
  - Solicit colleagues comments and critiques
  - Solicit comments and critiques from authorities in the field (building networks)
- Submit paper to conference, journal or examiners

Conclusions

This paper presents authors with some pointers on preparing academic papers. The areas of expectations, structure and method of preparation are covered. This advice is intended to be suggestive, not prescriptive, and is not intended to be a substitute for more comprehensive texts on academic writing. Authors need to broaden their knowledge of academic writing; by assimilating feedback, analysing the work of others, using the wealth of instructional literature available on writing, and most importantly through practice.

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