

5 Distinguishing Features of Academic Writing



5 Distinguishing Features of Academic Writing

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Welcome

The Textbook & Academic Authors Association provides professional development resources, industry news, and networking opportunities for textbook authors and authors of scholarly journal articles and books.

During Academic Writing Month 2019, TAA hosted a series of #AcWriChat TweetChat events focused on the distinguishing features of academic writing. Throughout the series we explored five academic writing features: [Precision](#), [Complexity](#), [Formality](#), [Objectivity](#), and [Accuracy](#). This ebook brings together the discussions and resources from those events.

Enjoy!

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Distinguishing Features of Academic Writing #1: Precision

What does it mean to write with academic precision? In this article, we recap the event where we sought the answer to this question. During the discussion, we also explored the importance of academic precision and the effects of word choice, active voice, redundancy, and organization on the goal of precision in our manuscripts.

What is precision and why is it important in academic writing?

Central to the discussion was the opening question, “What does it mean to write with academic precision?” An [online resource](#) from Dennis S. Bernstein at The University of Michigan states, “Precision writing is a style of written communication whose primary objective is to convey information.” Chat participant, Eric Schmieder, added that “Being precise means to choose the right words for the intended purpose. To be selective in an effort to clearly convey the purpose and meaning of the writing.”

But why is it important to be precise – or to convey



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information through the correct choice of words – in our academic writing? The Walden University guide titled, “[Scholarly Voice: Precision, Clarity, and Academic Expression](#)”, indicates “Devices that are often found in creative writing—for example: setting up ambiguity, inserting the unexpected, omitting the expected, and suddenly shifting the topic, tense, or person—can confuse or disturb readers of scientific prose.”

Schmieder noted, “Precision allows readers to clearly follow your methodology and argument. It adds to credibility and perception of accuracy and validity of your claim. It also improves the likelihood that readers will understand your research and findings.” Even when writing for an informed audience, as is often the case with a thesis or dissertation, precision is important. An [article by Rene Tetzner](#) notes that being precise means that you cannot “cut corners by neglecting to provide clear explanations of the problems, hypotheses, theories, concepts, approaches, trials, terminology and the like that are used and discussed, either frequently or rarely, by academics and scientists conducting advanced research in your subject area.”



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How does word choice and discipline-specific vocabulary affect academic precision?

We then considered two questions regarding how word choice affects precision in academic writing efforts: 1) How does word choice affect the goal of academic precision? and 2) How can you best incorporate discipline-specific terminology and acronyms for academic precision?

According to the Writing Center at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill handout on [“Word Choice”](#), “In an academic argument paper, what makes the thesis and argument sophisticated are the connections presented in simple, clear language.” Schmieder added that words may have different meaning in different context, so what is simple and clear for one audience, may not be to another.

“Words convey different meanings, even ones that can pass as synonyms have different levels of formality and appropriate place for use. Understanding what word conveys the appropriate meaning for your work and audience and precisely selecting that one matters.”

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An [online resource](#) from Lund University cites the use of discipline specific vocabulary as being relatively small in volume, but highly impactful on the resulting quality of manuscript. “5% of the vocabulary used in academic writing is discipline specific; however, despite the percentage being seemingly small, this type of vocabulary reflects on the quality of the text and the knowledge of the writer.”

To ensure quality and understanding, proper use of vocabulary and clarification, when necessary, is important. “Although not an exhaustive list of precise word choices, these are some of the most commonly misused words in academic writing”, according to [The Chicago School of Professional Psychology](#).

That v. Which

That v. Who

While v. Although

Since v. Because

Farther v. Further

Everyday v. Every day

Lay v. Lie

Less v. Fewer

May v. Might



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An [EAPFoundation.com](https://www.eapfoundation.com) resource notes that “in addition to general words and academic words, [readers of academic writing] will also need to learn subject-specific or ‘technical’ vocabulary.” As an academic author in a technical discipline “laden with acronyms and technical terminology”, Schmieder said during the TweetChat that he tries “to clarify any acronyms on first use and define any terms that may be ambiguous to ensure understanding in the context of [his] work.”

How can active voice improve academic precision?

With an understanding of the effect of word choice on academic precision, we explored the benefits of active voice in academic writing and how to choose words that support an active voice in our manuscripts.

According to [research](#) conducted by Thomas Sigel and published in the *Journal of Management Development*, passive voice weakens your scholarly argument. Specifically, Siegel notes that “by avoiding passive constructions in scholarly writing, academics can demonstrate a more



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thorough understanding of materials, thus strengthening arguments and presenting articles with clarity.” Additional benefits of using the active voice in academic and scientific writing were noted in [another online article](#) by Rene Tetzner. Schmieder added support for the use of active voice, stating, “Active voice, by nature, is more direct in its meaning resulting in clearer reception from the intended audience. Therefore, the use of active voice in academic writing results in more precise communication of ideas.”

For those unfamiliar with active voice, the Walden University Writing Center guide on [Active Versus Passive Voice](#) states, “Writing in the active voice means the subject of the sentence clearly performs the action that the verb expresses.” Schmieder noted that “making word choices with active voice in mind reduces the likelihood of ambiguity or unclear communication of ideas.” A review of Rebecca K. Frels’ Research in the Schools article, [“Editorial: A Typology of Verbs for Scholarly Writing”](#), can offer guidance on improving word choice for this purpose.



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How can the structure of academic writing improve precision?

Our final two questions during the event focused on the structure of an academic paper as it relates to precision in academic writing. Specifically, the effect of redundancy and the organization of ideas in the manuscript.

Addressing the effect of redundancy, Schmieder noted, “Since redundancy is generally not a direct repetition of statements, but more commonly a rephrasing of ideas, it can add unintended ambiguity to the argument by incorporating less precise word choices to the same claim.”

A Writing Commons article titled [“Writing Concisely and Avoiding Redundancy”](#) claims, “most of the time writers make the mistake of using more words than necessary to get their message across” and offers several examples of redundant phrases and overused adverbs.



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[Enago Academy](#) offers five tips on avoiding redundancy:

1. Emphasize with care
2. Don't say the same thing twice
3. Avoid double negatives
4. Be precise, not vague
5. Eliminate redundant words and phrases

Finally, on the topic of organization, [Monash University](#) notes that “Writing precisely requires considerable thought and careful editing.” The writing process is just that, a process. Richard D. Morey goes as far as to state that “writing is an essential scholarly skill” in his article on “[How to write a well-structured essay](#)” and offers the following six step approach to doing so.

1. Gather information
2. Form the thesis statement
3. Write the opening paragraph
4. Write each supporting paragraph separately
5. Write the concluding paragraph
6. Read everything together

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Schmieder added, “The sequence that ideas are presented in the paper improve understanding while minimizing the need for extra explanation of topics not yet covered. Reordering the delivery of content improves precision.” •



Distinguishing Features of Academic Writing #2: Complexity

Albert Einstein is credited with saying, “If you can’t explain it simply, you don’t understand it well enough.” If this is true, why does it seem that academic writing is distinguished by complexity?

In this second discussion on the distinguishing features of academic writing, we aimed to understand why complexity is not only present, but acceptable in academic writing, and the challenges and benefits of reducing complexity while maintaining academic rigor.

The complexity of academic writing

We began our conversation with the question of what makes academic writing complex and whether such complexity is necessary in academic writing.

According to Victoria Clayton in her article, “[The Needless Complexity of Academic Writing](#)”, appearing in *The Atlantic*, “The idea that writing should be clear, concise, and low-jargon isn’t a new one.... Yet in academia, unwieldy writing has become something of a protected tradition.”



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Building upon the perspective of Stephen Pinker in a [linked article](#) to his “[Why Academic Writing Sucks](#)” article in *Psychology Today*, Eric Charles says, “Pinker suggests that academic writing is bad because it tries to mix writing styles, and authors become muddled about the audience and its desires.” Further, Charles adds, “This leads to too much meta-discussion, and leads academics to lose the balance between their role as communicators of knowledge vs. their role as members of a profession with its own internal norms and mores.”

[Pat Thomson](#) reminds us, however, that “academic writing is a complex business. And it’s that complexity that makes it tricky.” She further explains that before you even start to write in academic settings, you need material from a well-designed project, defensible analysis, and a “good grip on the relevant literature”. That’s before getting ready to write, the actual writing process, and all the other elements specific to academic writing disciplines.

Certainly, especially in academic efforts to extend the body of



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knowledge through research and writing, the complexity of the business and the topics covered can't be denied, but the question really centers on whether the writing must, consequentially, be complex as well.

According to a [University of Reading LibGuides resource](#), “The purpose of academic writing is to communicate complex ideas in a way that makes them least likely to be challenged.” As a result, on the topic of complex writing, they add, “Do not be tempted to use complex language or expressions that are not your own, just to make your writing appear ‘academic’. Use straightforward language. Your reader needs to understand the information or ideas that you are conveying.”

That was precisely the subject of our second discussion question, “What effect does writing complexity have on comprehension by readers?” An [article from Illumine Ltd](#) notes that the use of organizational features “make a text more or less comprehensible to the targeted reading level”. Further they note, “Even challenging texts, however, can be rendered more readable through the simple addition of features designed to guide a reader.”



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At the core of our writing is sentence structure. In their article, [“Top 6 Tips to Optimize Sentence Length in Your Research Paper”](#), Enago Academy claims, “Long and convoluted sentences affect comprehension and readability.... Then again, too short sentences make for choppy writing without flow and cannot hold complex thoughts.” The key to readability is finding appropriate sentence length, focusing on your message, and being concise in your writing.

Challenges and benefits of reducing complexity

So, if the key to readability seems to be in designing our writing to eliminate complexity, why is complexity an acceptable feature of academic writing and does it support standards of academic rigor? This is where our discussion continued.

In her blog article, [“Academic Writing: Making \(some\) sense of a complex ‘process of mystery’”](#), Sherran Clarence notes that “The style of the writing needs to reflect the nature of the knowledge.” She goes on to note that the style is, in part, defined by the ‘rules’ or guidelines associated with the



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discipline and “If you break or bend too many of the rules, your readers may completely miss your meaning, and the paper will fall short of making your voice heard in relation to those you want to ‘converse’ with in your field.”

While this doesn’t necessarily answer the question of how complexity became an acceptable part of academic writing, it does offer insight into why and how it is used to support the standards of academic rigor within a discipline.

In a [study by Yelay Birhan](#), it is claimed that “academic writing is writing done by scholars for other scholars”. It is further stated that “Complexity is one of the features of academic writing. Written language is relatively more complex than spoken language.”

In their article, “[Challenging stereotypes about academic writing: Complexity, elaboration, explicitness](#)” published in the *Journal of English for Academic Purposes*, Douglas Biber and Bethany Gray acknowledge this stereotypical view, stating “The stereotypical view of professional academic writing is that it is grammatically complex, with elaborated structures,

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and with meaning relations expressed explicitly. In contrast, spoken registers, especially conversation, are believed to have the opposite characteristics.” They conclude, however, that although “academic writing is certainly complex, elaborated, and explicit, it does not conform to our stereotypes about these characteristics.”

Assuming the existence of complexity in academic writing, and perhaps to a level unnecessary to convey meaning to the readers, we then asked, “How can we reduce complexity while maintaining rigor?”

The first option is to reduce the complexity in your thought process that leads to academic writing. In her article, “[Reducing Over-Complexity in Your Scholarly Writing](#)”, Gina Hiatt states, “In the academic brain, thousands of ideas swirl around, each one reconnecting back to earlier ideas or spawning a new question, thought or idea. This is a sure sign of intelligence, you’ll be happy to know. On the other hand, this complexity, if not kept under control, can stop you from functioning at an optimal level.” She then offers a dozen methods for reducing over-complexity in your scholarly writing.

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Focusing on the actual writing process, Scribendi offers hints to tighten up your writing by focusing on common mistakes in their article, [“Five Habits to Avoid in Your Academic Writing”](#). Specific mistakes include passive voice, needlessly complex sentence structure, trumped-up vocabulary, overuse of footnotes, and plagiarism.

Reducing complexity may be a challenge, especially when scholarly language is what, after all, defines academic writing. As noted by those at the [University of Wollongong Australia](#), “nominalisation is a significant feature of academic writing contributing greatly to its impersonal tone, abstraction and complexity”, but it is also the feature that (according to the same resource) turns actions into concepts, allows for the elimination of individuals from the description of the process, encourages objectivity and further commenting on the concept, and decreases wordiness.

However, it is possible to make subtle improvements by eliminating common academic phrases that may make your work “sound more scientific”, but are unnecessary.



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Writers.net shared the following “10 Academic Phrases Your Academic Writing Can Go Without”:

1. On the other hand...
2. In order to
3. Indeed
4. However, moreover, furthermore...
5. As well as
6. For a short (or long) period of time
7. By using
8. Due to the fact that
9. In relation to
10. In the event that

Despite the challenges, there are benefits to reducing the complexity of your academic writing efforts – and, as discussed, ways to do so with minor revision efforts. The greatest benefit is being able to share your work with a larger audience. And as noted on [Elsevier Connect’s Authors’ Update blog](#), “There is growing pressure on the academic community to demonstrate the value of its research to a wider readership.” •



Distinguishing Features of Academic Writing #3: Formality

American poet, W.S. Merwin once said, “The idea of writing, to me, was, from the beginning, writing something which was a little different from the ordinary exchange of speech. It was something that had a certain formality, something in which the words were of interest in themselves.” Perhaps this same sentiment is the foundational principle from which academic writing has gotten its distinguishing feature of formality – to provide something in which the words are of interest in themselves.

In our third discussion of the distinguishing features of academic writing, we discussed what makes academic writing formal, the purpose of such formality, effect of formality on tone and word choice, whether there are levels of formality acceptable in academic writing, and ways to improve the formality of academic writing efforts.

Academic writing formality – reason and purpose

We started the conversation with the question, “What makes academic writing formal?” Based on information contained in multiple resources, the key element leading to formality in academic writing is the audience. When writing in a work or

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education setting where the audience includes a boss or a teacher, “a more formal style is appropriate”, according to [Study.com’s lesson on Formal Writing](#).

In their resource on formal writing, the [University of Wollongong](#) also notes the significance of audience when deciding on the formality of the writing style. “It’s not what you say, but how you say it and who you say it to!”, they claim, identifying that opinion and attitude expressed in academic writing should be both formal and objective.

Further, according to the [EAP Foundation resource on academic style](#), academic writing is also different from spoken academic English. Specifically, they stated, “Academic English, like any writing, has its own conventions or ‘style’. It is a formal, written style, which means that it has aspects which make it different from ‘spoken’ academic English”.

Whether the reason academic writing is formal due to audience or format, we asked participants to consider the purpose of academic writing with our second question. In the University of Florida’s [Guidelines for Effective Professional and Academic Writing](#), they note that “[m]aintaining a

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professional and serious tone in professional writing is important” because “[t]he purpose of professional writing is to convey information in a clear, succinct, fluid way.”

Professional Essay Writers offers five reasons formality in academic writing is necessary in their blog article titled “[What is the importance of formality in academic writing?](#)”, as follows:

1. Tone as a means of establishing certitude
2. Makes your writing legible
3. Adds an element of intelligibility
4. Empowers you to believe in your own writing skills
5. Enhances your writing skills

The effect of formality on tone and word choice

Related to formality of academic writing, we then asked how tone and word choice are affected by a more formal writing style. In recognizing the earlier claim that a more formal style is appropriate for the audience of academic writing, [Lumen Learning](#) notes that “[t]he writer’s tone, which is conveyed



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through word choice and sentence structure, impacts the reader's response." Further, they remind us that "[f]ormal writing may require using specialized terms even though some people in your audience may not understand them."

But you may wonder what tone is and why it matters. A Temple University resource titled "[Tone and Formality in Academic Writing](#)" states, "Tone, a term for your manner of expression in speech or writing, is another way of saying 'attitude,' as in the attitude your readers will perceive when they peruse your text. Many times, writers inadvertently choose an inappropriate tone for their writing, which can cause misunderstandings and frustration." Although easier to interpret tone in spoken language through voice, word choice and structure convey tone in a written form.

You may, therefore, ask the title question of IUP's online resource, "[Can I write like I speak?](#)" The reality of the answer provided is that audience still matters and they recommend reading aloud to hear the tone and message you are conveying in written form - "It is always important to read over your work aloud after completing it to smooth it out and



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check for mistakes. Always keep your message clear to your reader, remember your audience, and maintain one tone throughout your paper.”

The words chosen to express the message both influence the tone and the perception of the reader. In a more formal writing style, the use of single word verbs in place of phrasal verbs is more common, as discussed in Dushyanthi Mendis’ paper titled “[Formality in academic writing: The use/non-use of phrasal verbs in two varieties of English](#)”.

Further, the [Academic English online resource on formality states](#), “Although there is no set rules on formality at university, this information on academic style is generally accepted throughout most universities.” and provides the following list of rules:

- All contracted forms need to be in full forms
- Try to avoid the following:
 - Informal adjectives
 - Colloquial expressions
 - Idioms
 - Phrasal and informal verbs
 - Personal pronouns



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- Incorporate the following:
 - Passive constructions
 - Present participles or gerunds to create more complex forms
 - Noun phrases
 - High frequency academic words taken from academic literature
 - Fixed academic phrases

Choosing a formal academic writing style conveys a tone consistent with the expectations of academic readers and influences the choice of words and language elements to maintain that tone in the manuscript.

An acceptable level of formality in academic writing

Recently John Bond wrote [an article for the TAA blog](#) in which he claimed, “Writing, even scholarly writing, is becoming less formal and driven less by grammar rules.” Our discussion addressed this claim asking whether there are different levels of formality in academic writing, and whether academic writing is, indeed, becoming less formal.



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A [Writer's Domain](#) blog article identifies four levels of formality in writing that can be considered as measurements for where academic writing exists on the spectrum: the familiar, the casual, the semi-formal, and the formal.

According to [Karlstad University](#), “Academic writing requires a degree of formality which differs from the more conversational styles many writers are used to. Being able to write with sufficient formality is necessary for your writing to be successful.” Depending on your definition of sufficient, perhaps a semi-formal or casual level of formality may be acceptable in modern academic writing.

Ken Hyland and Fang (Kevin) Jiang directly tackled the question “[Is academic writing becoming more informal?](#)” in their research. Their conclusion? “[I]t depends. While academic writing is becoming more informal, this is by small margins and depends on the discipline and features being considered.” They do note, however, that “[o]bservers have noticed a gradual shift away from standard detached and impersonal styles of writing to ones that allow more personal comment, narration and stylistic variation”.



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In [another study](#) conducted by Melissa Keppens, “the formality level in four different genres of spoken and written discourse: academic papers, conference papers, popular science articles and popular science speeches” was researched. She concluded that while all four had statistically high levels of formality, academic papers ranked highest of the four genres and written category scores also were found to be higher than that of spoken categories.

Improving the formality of your academic writing

With an acceptance that, although perhaps diminishing, formality remains a distinguishing factor of academic writing, we concluded our discussion on the topic with the question, “How can you improve the formality of your academic writing?”

According to the [“Essay writing guide: maintaining formality”](#) from EssayPartner, “Every essay can be written following the same formula, from the introductory paragraph to body paragraphs to the concluding paragraph. Even the paragraphs have a set formula. While the formulas are rather easy to

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remember and use, many people have difficulty with the challenge of maintaining formality as they write.” Part of this formula is the use of formal verbs, noted earlier. A [list of formal verbs](#) is provided in a resource from Universidad del Rosario.

Finally, Elsevier Author Services shares these five tips for formalizing your writing:

- Avoid contractions
- Don't use clichés
- Stay away from slang
- Use the passive voice
- Ask someone to proofread •



Distinguishing Features of Academic Writing #4: Objectivity

A good researcher is objectively seeking answers to their research questions and reporting those findings objectively to the community at large. But what does it mean to write objectively? How do we maintain objectivity where possible? Finally, how do we make efforts to identify and avoid bias in our academic writing?

In our fourth discussion of the distinguishing features of academic writing, we discussed all of these questions. A summary of the discussion and related resources is below.

We started the discussion with the core question, “What does it mean to write objectively?” Danielle Apfelbaum responded saying, “For me, it means being conscious of and checking my attachments to and biases toward the content I’m creating and revising.”

Eric Schmieder said, “Writing objectively means to separate yourself from the subject matter and any preconceptions associated with a topic to evaluate what exists rather than what is believed to be true.” Apfelbaum added, “I think it also extends to acknowledging that these preconceptions exist and

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that, despite the writer's best efforts, a complete separation of fact and feeling might not always be possible." Schmieder responded, "I certainly agree. It's not possible to eliminate bias, but through acknowledgement of them, we can be open to alternative ideas."

A [resource on the Using English for Academic Purposes \(UEfAP\) website](#) says that objectivity "means that the main emphasis should be on the information that you want to give and the arguments you want to make, rather than you." The [Study.com](#) lesson titled [Objective Writing: Definition & Examples](#) supports this definition stating, "Objective writing is writing that you can verify through evidence and facts. If you are writing objectively, you must remain as neutral as possible through the use of facts, statistics, and research."

To make your writing more objective, the [Online Writing and Learning Link \(OWLL\)](#) at Massey University suggests the following techniques:

- Be explicit in expressing your ideas,
- Avoid intensifiers which can tend to exaggerate your writing in an imprecise, subjective way, and



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- Try to avoid making value judgements through use of words such as amazing or dreadful.

With an understanding of what it means to be objective in academic writing and some techniques for making your writing more objective, we asked, “What types of things can affect your ability to be objective in your academic writing?”

Schmieder said, “I think the biggest barrier to objectivity is ego. When authors are not willing to explore ideas and results that contradict their established beliefs, but rather find evidence to support their own opinion, objectivity is eliminated.” Apfelbaum added that objectivity is affected by “your stake in the outcome of the writing project.”

Schmieder agreed saying, “Definitely another factor influencing objectivity. What does the author have to gain from the results? Good point.”

Something else to consider, as noted in a [resource from The University of Sheffield](#), is that “academic writing is a language that no one is born speaking.” For some authors, there is an assumption that simply writing in third person



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makes the writing objective and, consequently, academic authors are often advised not to use first person in their academic writing. An article by David Gooblar, "[In Praise of the First Person](#)", published on *Chronicle Vitae*, claims however, "Subjectivity and objectivity, in fact, have nothing to do with which grammatical person you choose to use."

John Warner claims, in his *Inside Higher Ed* article "[The Pitfalls of 'Objectivity'](#)", that "'objectivity' is in the eye of the beholder" and that "different audiences may require different choices of evidence". Instead of focusing on objectivity as an academic skill, he suggests arming students with "critical sensibility" instead.

So, then we asked, "Why is it important for academics to write objectively?" According to Hanover High School English teacher, Mr. Concilio, on his writing resources webpage, [On Objectivity in Academic Writing](#), "The purpose of academic writing is to advance human understanding based on unbiased observation and analysis. As such, academic writing is supposed to be objective."



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Schmieder claims, “As academics we should be exploring subject matters from multiple perspectives to identify and present facts that can further a body of knowledge. While opinion and experience may lead to avenues of discovery, challenging theories and beliefs leads to truth.” The Capital Community College Foundation states in their [Guide to Grammar and Writing](#) that “it is better to describe as objectively as possible what has happened and to allow our readers to form their own opinions”.

“Though sometimes thought of as long-winded or inaccessible, strong academic writing...informs, analyzes, and persuades in a straightforward manner and enables the reader to engage critically in a scholarly dialogue”, according to the ThoughtCo article, [“An Introduction to Academic Writing”](#). Further, “The goal of academic writing is to convey a logical argument from an objective standpoint. Academic writing avoids emotional, inflammatory, or otherwise biased language. Whether you personally agree or disagree with an idea, it must be presented accurately and objectively in your paper.”



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But perhaps this is easier said than done. Our next question was, therefore, “How do you ensure objectivity in academic writing?” Schmieder said, “To the extent that is possible, I’d say the goal should be to challenge your beliefs. Look for opposing viewpoints and identify what makes them credible. Let them serve as a litmus test for your own claims.”

Apfelbaum added, “I like to give my writing time to breathe; I set it aside and come back to with fresh eyes. I’m less attached to the work when I give myself distance from it.” Schmieder considered this excellent advice noting, “If we can become ‘readers’ rather than ‘writers’ of our work, we can be more objective in the evaluation of the ideas.”

Jamie Goodwin offers six tips on [how to use an objective tone in your writing](#), as follows:

1. Use facts and data
2. Show opposing viewpoints
3. Refrain from using personal pronouns
4. Avoid contractions
5. Consider your word choice
6. Don’t ask questions

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According to the Top Education Institute's [Library Guide on Academic Writing](#), "It is important to choose the most relevant words to explain concepts and ideas. Formal and specialist terminology can help express meaning in a precise way and avoid misinterpretation."

In an article on The Proofreader, the following [5-point Checklist for Writing Objectively](#) is shared:

1. Use facts, credible evidence and resulting logic
2. Omit emotive language, intensifiers and judgmental language
3. Be tentative and hedge your statements
4. Do not stereotype and remain gender-neutral
5. Cut personal language and personal pronouns

After discussing the definition, purpose, and ways to incorporate objectivity into our academic writing, we turned our attention to a related discussion topic – bias. Our first question related to bias was, "What are ways that bias appears in academic writing?"



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Schmieder said, “I think bias appears as absolutes. When there is not room for the reader to question the information or challenge the author’s approach, a piece is biased. However, when nothing is absolute or based on a process that can be recreated and tested, bias prevails.”

Apfelbaum offered that bias results from “extending/generalizing conclusions beyond what one’s data supports” or “overemphasizing certain results and short-changing others in one’s discussion of the findings.” Schmieder agreed saying, “Overuse of self-citation and limited literature basis for claims as well as intentional omission of opposing thought from the literature” are clues when identifying bias in a manuscript.

According to the [Study.com](#) resource, [Recognizing Biases, Assumptions & Stereotypes in Written Works](#), “Recognizing biases takes practice.” They recommend asking the following questions to help identify biases:

- Does the writer use overly positive or overly negative language about the subject?



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- Does the writer use emotionally charged language about the subject?
- Does the writer use vague or generalized language about the subject?
- Does the writer omit any important facts?
- Does the writer add information and evidence that seems unnecessary just to bolster his or her point?
- Does the writer fail to properly cite his or her sources?

The New Jersey Institute of Technology guide, *How to Evaluate Information Sources: Identify Bias*, identifies bias as “when a writer or speaker uses a selection of facts, choice of words, and the quality and tone of description, to convey a particular feeling or attitude”. Further, they state “Being aware of bias and knowing how to identify, analyze, and assimilate biased information properly is a skill to be treasured. It puts you in charge of how you think”.

In the PressBooks resource, *Choosing & Using Sources: A Guide to Academic Research*, they note the following six clues about bias:



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1. Citing sources – biased work includes references without links to the source
2. Evidence – biased work includes assertions with little evidence or documentation
3. Vested interest – the author of biased work seems to have a vested interest in the topic
4. Imperative language – biased work includes many strongly worded assertions
5. Multiple viewpoints – biased work includes only one version of controversial issues

[Ashford University](#) says, “In academic writing, it is important to avoid using language that can be seen as biased.”

Similarly, Susan M. Inez notes in her article, [“Why Avoiding Bias in Writing Is So Important and How to Do It”](#), that “bias prevents you from being objective” and it “can express false assumptions and beliefs and present a lack of sensitivity”.

Therefore, our final question of the event was, “What can you do to avoid bias in your academic writing?” Schmieder suggested first, “Explore alternative lines of thought with an open mind. Play devil’s advocate from time to time and read



Distinguishing Features of Academic Writing #4: Objectivity

work that is in direct opposition to your own beliefs.” He also advised being willing to “step out of your comfort zone. Find ways to explain how you came to your conclusions to someone who knows nothing about your research. Question the answers.”

Apfelbaum said, “Get a review buddy. Have someone you trust look at your work. No matter how much distance you give yourself from a work, nothing helps like having someone else critique it.” Schmieder added, “Accountability is another benefit to the buddy system in writing, but it’s important to choose someone who will challenge your biases rather than echo and uphold them as well.” Apfelbaum agreed, “Absolutely! Such a good point!”

In a related article, Sarah Prince shared five simple rules for [banishing bias](#):

1. Be specific when necessary
2. Leave out superfluous differences
3. Call people what they prefer to be called
4. Do not reduce people to their ailment or condition
5. Do not make your experience the norm or standard •



Distinguishing Features of Academic Writing #5: Accuracy

In our final discussion of this series on distinguishing features of academic writing, we focused on accuracy.

Specifically, we considered what it means to be accurate, how understanding and vocabulary affects accuracy, how to check for accuracy in sources we use, how accuracy affects the structure, style, and grammar of a manuscript, and why accuracy is important in academic writing. Below is a summary of the discussion.

Elements of accuracy in academic writing

We began our discussion with the question, “What does it mean to be accurate?” According to [ThoughtCo](#), “accuracy is how close a value is to its true value.” This can often be confused with precision (discussed previously as another distinguishing factor of academic writing) which measures repeatability.

[West Sound Academic Library](#) defines accuracy as “the reliability, truthfulness and correctness of the content” and [The Mayfield Handbook of Technical & Scientific Writing](#) states that accuracy has the following three main aspects:



Distinguishing Features of Academic Writing #5: Accuracy

1. **Document accuracy** – proper coverage in appropriate detail
2. **Stylistic accuracy** – careful use of language to express meaning
3. **Technical accuracy** – grounded in understanding of the subject

Considering the element of technical accuracy, we asked, “How does the author’s understanding of a subject and its vocabulary affect the accuracy of a manuscript?” Much like speaking a foreign language, it can be asked of academic writing, “What is more important...fluency or accuracy?” According to the British Council article on [fluency vs. accuracy](#), accuracy in language “demonstrates your ability to use the necessary vocabulary, grammar and punctuation correctly”.

According to a National University of Singapore Centre for English Language Communication resource, [Using Appropriate Words in an Academic Essay](#), “Choosing words that are appropriate in your writing can convince your readers that your work is serious and important. On the other hand, if your words are unclear, ambiguous and/or incorrect, chances

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are your readers might be confused about the content of your essay or might even think that your work is not worth reading.”

Enago Academy notes in their article, [“Word Choice in Academic Writing: Tips to Avoid Common Problems”](#), the following six common problems concerning word choice:

1. Misused words
2. Words with unwanted connotations or meanings
3. Complex words where a shorter, simpler term would do
4. Awkward word choices
5. Words that are similar to each other, but convey the wrong meaning
6. Words that convey finer shades of meaning

Checking for accuracy in source information

There’s an old adage, “garbage in, garbage out”, so our next topic for discussion during the event was, “How can we check for accuracy in the sources we use as references in our writing?”



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According to Edward F. Barroga in his article in the *Journal of Korean Medical Science*, “Inaccurate reference lists negatively affect the indexability and influence of a scholarly journal. Authors who cite references without retrieving and reading related full-texts may increase inaccuracies.” Further, “The authors’ duty is to continuously upgrade their skills of processing scholarly information and referring to essential sources. ...Rechecking the relevance and format of each reference by searching through evidence-based bibliographic databases is also the authors’ responsibility”.

A resource on [reference accuracy](#) from Lund University states, “Correct referencing is vital for reasons of clarity as well as for reasons of academic integrity.” In an effort to aim for referencing accuracy, they suggest using sources in a way that ensures readers can “understand which sources materially influenced the new text”, “receive an accurate impression of what the source text said”, and “understand whether the language comes from the source”.

It is also important to use only credible sources in our academic writing. To determine if a source is credible,



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Purdue University's Online Writing Center (OWL) recommends asking the following four questions:

1. Who is the author?
2. How recent is the source?
3. What is the author's purpose?
4. What type of sources does your audience value?

Effects of accuracy on manuscript structure, style, and grammar

Our next two discussion questions focused on how accuracy applies to the manuscript structure, style and grammar in academic writing. Specifically, "How does accuracy affect the structure of a manuscript?" and "How does accuracy apply to style and grammar in academic writing?"

In his article, "[11 steps to structuring a science paper editors will take seriously](#)", Angel Borja notes that the order in which we write a manuscript is often different from the order in which the information is ultimately published. He offers the following steps to organizing your manuscript for publication:

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1. Prepare the figures and tables
2. Write the methods
3. Write up the results
4. Write the discussion
5. Write a clear conclusion
6. Write a compelling introduction
7. Write the abstract
8. Compose a concise and descriptive title
9. Select keywords for indexing
10. Write the acknowledgements
11. Write up the references

[Enago Academy](#) offers this advice for organizing your thoughts and focusing on your manuscript goals. “Ask yourself what you are trying to convey to the reader. What is the most important message from your research? How will your results affect others? Is more research necessary?”

A group of authors from the University of Mississippi Medical Center, led by Angelia Garner, published [Ten Points to Address When Publishing a Manuscript](#) and noted that “Guidelines are readily available to aid authors in proper

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format and submission of manuscripts for journals. Common mistakes in writing, methodology, and references can be prevented with preparation and attention to details.” They cautioned as well, that “Authors must maintain their sense of purpose throughout the publication process in order to fulfill their mission to add value and knowledge to the scientific community. “The University of Reading LibGuides resource, [“Thinking about grammar”](#), claims “where it’s necessary to convey ideas accurately and clearly, writing grammatically is important. In academic writing, where you are expected to demonstrate your understanding of very complex ideas, it is absolutely essential.” They continue to provide advice for thinking about words, sentences, and paragraphs and to consider using software to check your grammar, however they caution to “never just accept all proposed changes in spelling or grammar made by an electronic spell or grammar checker – they can radically change the meaning of your writing!”

[Walden University](#) says that “Self-awareness is the key to being able to revise for grammatical errors. Grammatical



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errors tend to follow patterns, so once you are able to identify the types of errors you most commonly make, you will be able to focus specifically on these.” They recommend paying attention to feedback you receive and to keep a grammar revision journal to track your most common grammatical errors.

The importance of accuracy in academic writing

As we closed our discussion on accuracy as a distinguishing feature of academic writing, we asked, “Why is it important to ensure accuracy in our academic work?”

One area accuracy is routinely discussed is in the reporting of survey data and results. According to Graham Kalton at the [Statistics Canada Symposium 2001](#), “Increased research efforts are needed to investigate the various sources of inaccuracy, both to help guide improvements in survey methods and to fully inform users about the overall accuracy of the estimates they are using. User needs should affect decisions about fitness for use. Producers should make greater efforts to communicate data on accuracy to users and to encourage them to use those data.”

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Roger Vaughan, in his *American Journal of Public Health* article, “[The Importance of Accuracy](#)”, identifies three considerations on the power and convenience of statistical software used to generate data and analysis:

1. although we have software programs that will happily produce results once the button is pushed, we often don’t completely understand the applications, assumptions, and interpretations of the more advanced methods,
2. because these “higher level” analytic methods are now so readily accessible, many of the appropriate simple analyses are often set aside, making the digestion of the content and meaning of many of our articles more difficult, and
3. our reliance on point-and-click computer analyses often means that we take whatever is printed on the output as gospel and transfer it verbatim to the tables in our articles.

Finally, as noted in the Northern Illinois University resource on [Responsible Conduct in Data Management](#), “Regardless of the field of study or preference for defining data (quantitative,

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qualitative), accurate data collection is essential to maintaining the integrity of research. Both the selection of appropriate data collection instruments (existing, modified, or newly developed) and clearly delineated instructions for their correct use reduce the likelihood of errors occurring.” •



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