UNIT 1 The academic writing process

This unit aims to improve writing skills by:

1 introducing the idea that writing is a set of processes
2 showing how to distinguish between academic and personal styles of writing
3 looking at the grammar of academic discourse
4 practising visualising text as a pre-writing step.

Introduction

You will already be capable of writing in English and so this course is intended to extend that skill to include the different types of written English essential for studying.

In this unit, we will show you examples of both personal and formal writing and help you distinguish between them. A number of texts will be used as examples of the writing process, and you will be asked to identify the elements of grammar that indicate formal writing.

In later units, we will study the processes of writing in more detail. All the later units will include opportunities to learn and practise at least one of the key grammatical elements identified here.

Thinking about writing processes

People set about the writing process in many different ways. They require all kinds of different situations in which to feel 'comfortable' when writing. Use the following short questionnaire to help you think about your own writing processes.

- When you write an important text, do you make more than one draft?
- Do you prefer to write on paper or use a computer? Have you ever asked yourself **why**?
- What do you do before you start writing?
- How do you start writing? Do you begin at 'the beginning' or jump in wherever you have some ideas? Do you think one approach is better than another?
- What do you do while you are writing? Do you stop and think? Do you ever go back to the beginning and start again?
- When you finish your first complete draft, what do you do next?

Unit 1 The academic writing process **15**

If you are working with others, choose a partner and discuss your answers to the questionnaire. There are no 'correct' answers, so freely discuss all views. Would your answers be the same for writing in your own language as for writing in English?

Now that you have considered some basic questions about writing, ask yourself:

> *What do I hope to get from this course?*

If you are working in a group, your teacher may want you to discuss this question with others. Alternatively, you may be asked to write a **rough draft** of a short answer at home.[1]

Distinguishing between academic and personal styles of writing

What is academic writing?

There are many different kinds of academic writing in English. Some of these differences arise from the different disciplines and the ways in which they create and share knowledge; some relate to the audience (the reader); and some to the use to which the text will be put.

The rules of academic writing in English are quite complicated; nevertheless most students find that they can recognise the difference between informal writing and formal, academic writing.

TASK 1 *Recognising academic writing*

A: Look at the following sentence.

> *Linguists were and remain convinced by Noam Chomsky of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, who discovered that however disparate human languages seem, all share a common, basic structure, seemingly hardwired into the brain.*

If you are working in a group, choose a partner and together identify at least three features of this sentence that you think are **academic**.

B: Now look at the following sentence.

> *The way you speak says a lot about you.*

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1 A rough draft is a first version of a piece of writing: it might be early thinking about a topic for an essay or report; or, **as in this case**, it might be a way of capturing your thinking about something in order to talk clearly about it later.

With your partner, identify at least three features of this sentence that seem non-academic to you.

Note: This separation between academic and non-academic is not simple or absolute. You will see non-academic style in academic texts; and academic features will occur in non-academic texts. But it is generally true that academic texts have predictable patterns of grammar, organisation, argument, and of giving credit to the work and words of others. You will learn about these predictable patterns in this book.

TASK 2 *Recognising levels of formality*
Study Table 1.1, which identifies two quite different levels of formality, and then complete the table that follows.

Table 1.1: *Different levels of formality*

	Academic	**Non-academic**
Reader	academics	family and friends
Content	serious thought	conversational
Style	complex sentences showing considerable variety in construction	mostly simple and compound sentences joined by conjunctions such as *and* or *but*
Organisation	clear and well planned	less likely to be as clear and as organised
Grammar	likely to be error free	may not always use complete sentences
Vocabulary	technical and academic language used accurately	use of short forms, idioms and slang

Read the sentences and tick (✓) either F (formal) or I (informal) after each sentence. Make notes on which features helped you reach your decision.

Sentences	F	I	Notes
I couldn't finish the interviews on time.			
The initial tests were completed and the results analysed by June 2002.			
I'd like to start by drawing your attention to previous research in this area.			
In the 1990s, some researchers started to point out the problems with this theory.			
He agreed with me that this procedure didn't make much sense.			
We'll repeat the test sometime next year.			
While it is still too early to draw firm conclusions from the data, preliminary analysis suggests the following trends are present.			
In addition, the research attempts to answer two further related questions.			

TASK 3 *Distinguishing between levels of formality*

Put the following texts in order by giving 1 to the most academic and 4 to the least academic. To help you, think about: Who is this text intended for? Why would readers pick up this text and read it? What resources did the writer of the text have available?

A

What makes a good paragraph? It's difficult to say. Anyway, I'll try to give you an answer. A good paragraph starts with a main idea of some kind. The rest of the paragraph goes on to develop the main idea by explaining it, or by supporting it with evidence.

B

The reciprocal relationship between reading and writing has become a focal point of L1 and L2 literacy research. Empirical findings have led researchers to recognize that reading and composing (i.e. writing) both involve the construction of meaning, development and application of complex cognitive and linguistic skills, activation of existing knowledge and past experience, and the ability to solve problems.

C

The difference between a paper and an online presentation is that in print your document forms a whole and the reader is focused on the entire set of information, whereas on the Web you need to split each document into multiple hyperlinked pages since users are not willing to read long pages.

http://www.sun.com/980713/webwriting/wftw1.html

D

The University of Aizu was established in April 1993 with the goal of educating and graduating students who would become Japan's leading professionals in computer science and engineering (Kunii, 1994). With this in mind, the University's curriculum has been planned to include courses that will provide its graduates with the ability to effectively communicate in English, the international computer science language. The capability to document scholarly and research activities in a form that can be readily disseminated to the international computer science community is considered to be essential for all scientists and engineers. Effective writing is a necessary skill for technical professionals, and it has been claimed that scientists and engineers spend 25% of their professional time on writing a variety of technically oriented documents (15% informal, and 10% formal) (Huckin, 1991). To prepare our students for these endeavours, a two-term English Technical Writing course has been included in the required curriculum of all University of Aizu students.

TASK 4 *Explaining features of formality*
Using the features shown in Table 1.1, try to explain why you have put the extracts (in Task 3) in the order you chose. Make some notes to share with a group of classmates or with the teacher.

TASK 5 *Reflecting on academic writing*
Look back at the Introduction and the 'Thinking about writing processes' section of this unit, and think about your own language. What might your responses have been if you were looking at academic writing in your own language? Make some notes as you go. Then turn your notes into a short piece of writing that would begin to answer the question:

> *Are the rules for academic writing in your native language the same as, or different from, those for writing in English?*

The grammar of academic discourse

TASK 6 *Grammatical features of academic writing*
Study Table 1.2, which shows some types of language commonly associated with academic and non-academic writing. The key words and expressions are shown in italics (for example *There's*). Note that individual writers do not always use these 'correctly': some academic writers tend towards informality, while some personal writing can seem quite formal.

Unit 1 The academic writing process **19**

Table 1.2: *Key attributes of academic and non-academic texts*

Academic writing	Non-academic writing
Full forms	**Short forms**
There *is*	*There's*
The test *did not* show	The test *didn't* show
Connectors	**Connectors**
◗ The theory appears to provide an explanation for this phenomenon. *However*, this is not the case on a closer examination of the facts.	◗ I want to go to the cinema, *only* I have to work late.
◗ The experimental design was weak. *Moreover*, the methodology was faulty.	◗ Because of work, I can't go to London this weekend. *Anyway*, I don't have enough money.
Use of nominal groups (verbs made into nouns)	**Use of pronouns**
The application (noun) of the results needs to be carefully considered	*We* need to carefully consider *how we apply* the results.
rather than:	
We need to carefully consider how we *apply (verb)* the results.	
Use of the passive voice	**Use of the active voice**
In recent years, several analyses of survey data *have been published*.	In recent years, researchers *have published* several analyses of survey data.
Concise vocabulary	**Informal vocabulary**
… *the focus is on x*	… *talks about x*
Researchers assumed that …	*They thought that* …
Point of view	**Point of view**
◗ Objective and impersonal, e.g. *This essay attempts to* …	◗ Subjective and personal, e.g. *In my essay I will attempt to* …
◗ Using qualifying language, e.g. *One possible reason may be* …	◗ Asking rhetorical questions, e.g. *How can this be so?*

One kind of academic writing that you will read frequently is the **abstract**. When an academic article is quite long, an abstract serves as a summary or an overview of it. Some lecturers will ask you to write an abstract of your own work. Read the abstract below, then do the tasks that follow.

Linguistic relativity

An area of disagreement among experts in the relationship between language and the mind is **linguistic relativity**, also known as the **Sapir–Whorf hypothesis**, the very popular notion that each language, because of its linguistic uniqueness, <u>develops</u> <u>its own ways</u> of thinking about the world. For example, <u>if you agree</u> with this opinion <u>you would say</u> that <u>people from Korea</u> 'think differently' from people from Spain because their languages are so different. Even though this belief is popular in many places, there <u>isn't</u> much proof for it. Even <u>experts who disagree</u> about <u>lots of other things</u> often agree that this idea is <u>wrong</u> (Steinberg 1993; Pinker 1994).

[Source: R. Carter & D. Nunan *The Cambridge TESOL Guide.* Cambridge University Press, p. 84.]

● The underlined parts are examples of non-academic language: put each into the correct column, using Table 1.2 for reference. (Note: Some of them may fit into more than one column.)

Pronouns	Informal vocabulary	Active verbs	Point of view

● Although the text is non-academic, there are a few elements of academic language use. If you are working in a group, choose a partner and see if you can find three examples of academic language in it.

TASK 7 *Rewriting for formality*

The following text is written in an informal style. Rewrite it as a more formal text by making changes to the grammar and vocabulary.

Writing a literature review

The literature review means you have to look critically at all the research that is relevant to your research. Some people think that the review is just a summary but I don't agree. A summary is necessary, but you also need to judge the work, show how it holds together, and show how it relates to your work. What I mean is, you just can't describe a whole paper, you have to select which parts of the research you are going to talk about, show how it fits with other people's research, and how it fits with your work.

TASK 8 *Rewriting for impersonal style*
The following introduction to a text is written in a personal style. Read it, then answer the questions that follow.

A Way with Words
Do languages help mold[2] the way we think?

A controversial idea from the 1930s is getting a second look.
By J.R. Minkel

The way you speak says a lot about you. Your dialect or accent might indicate where you grew up, for instance, while your vocabulary may suggest the type of education you've had. But can the language you use – English, Spanish, Mandarin, etc. – indicate the way you think, or help shape those thoughts?

In the 1930s, American linguist Benjamin Lee Whorf argued persuasively that language did indeed affect thought. For instance, Eskimos, who parse "snow" into at least seven different terms, must find our simplistic way of talking about it unthinkable. While Whorf's views fell out of favor – especially that native language created what amounts to a straitjacket for thought – they weren't forgotten. Now a group of cognitive psychologists has revived the search for the effects of language on the mind, with some provocative results.

Researchers first sought out Whorfian effects in the 1950s, looking at color vocabularies. Some languages chop the spectrum into just two categories of light and dark; others make finer, but not necessarily the same, distinctions. Do these

2 This text is written in American English: in British English this would be spelled mould.

> linguistic patterns mean that speakers of separate languages perceive color in different ways? Apparently not. By the 1970s, psychologists concluded that linguistic and perceptual distinctions were independent of one another.
>
> [**Extracted from: J. R. Minkel, A Way with Words,** *Scientific American* **March 25, 2002**]

1 Why do you think the writer chooses to begin in this way?
2 Rewrite the introduction to make it appear more objective and impersonal, mainly by making changes to the use of pronouns.
3 Replace the rhetorical question and answer in paragraph 3 with a qualifying statement. (A rhetorical question is one where the person asking makes clear the answer he expects; a qualifying statement is one that adds more detail, makes the discussion more precise.)

The writing process: Visualising your text

To write texts that are academic, begin by thinking about three key elements: audience, purpose and material. Ask yourself: Who is the text for? Why is the text needed? What resources – what data, evidence, reference material, and so on – have I got that I can use? You should then find it easier to start writing. Looking back at Task 6 might also help.

Ideas for starting an academic text
The following are some ideas for getting started with developing your own academic text.

● **Start with 'material'.** Make sure you have all your research materials in one place. Read quickly through the texts and use (if permitted) highlighters to indicate material that you think you can use in your own writing. Use one colour highlighter for ideas, another for evidence, and another for arguments. Make sure you use the same colour for the same idea wherever it appears. You'll end up with some related points from different texts. That suggests these are important aspects of the topic. Write one or two rough sentences (don't worry about language correctness at this stage) to state one of the ideas or arguments in your own way. Now move on to do the same with another highlighted area.
● **Start with 'purpose'.** Find out what your text is going to be used for. For example, are you expected to *report* or to *argue*? When you read reports, you will see that they are not written in the same

way as essays or arguments. (We will look at these differences in
Unit 2.)

● **Start with 'audience'.** Think about who will read what you have
written. How much do they know about the topic? What will *they*
use the text for? What kinds of writing are they used to reading?

TASK 9 *Writing about writing*

Write approximately 500 words describing the difficulties you face
(or expect to face) in writing academic essays and articles in English.
Before you start, if you are studying in a group, talk to one or more
classmates about who the audience would be for this text (your
teacher? your parents? student readers of a college newsletter?), what
material you have to work with (your own experience? what else?),
and why it might be worth doing this task well (will it help you plan
your strategies for learning to write during this course?).

TASK 10 *Writing about thinking*

This is a harder task and you should only do this if instructed by
your teacher.

Write a 500-word essay that you think fits the expectations of
'academic writing' on the following topic:

> *Do languages help mould the way we think? If we all spoke the
> same language, would we think in the same way? Discuss the
> issue using examples, details, and your personal experiences of
> English and your native language.*