



HOW IS ACADEMIC WRITING DIFFERENT?

Although academic writing can seem like an alien language, it actually follows a number of specific conventions as a variant of formal written English:

- ◆ Academic writing has its own **register**, in the same way that business writing, legal writing, poetry, and cookbooks have their own register. Your goal is not to suppress your voice as a writer and replace it with academic register—rather, it is to develop your voice as a writer so that you can express yourself clearly and cogently in that register.
- ◆ Academic writing has **standards of evidence**, which vary from field to field. Generally, you are expected to support your assertions with the best evidence you can muster. In some fields, especially scientific fields, only the most rigorous evidence is acceptable.
- ◆ Academic writing has its own **structure**, which generally requires you to have a clear thesis statement or a limited focus. You need to make your thesis or focus clear to the reader, and develop that throughout your writing with a rational organization and structure. Introductions and conclusions are a big part of this process.
- ◆ Academic writing, even for a class, is assumed to have a specific **audience**. For example, this may be limited to others in the same field or sub-field, it may be cross-disciplinary, it may be targeted to policy-makers, or it may be aimed at a segment of the public. You



are expected to adjust your level of detail according to your audience's pre-existing knowledge.

- ◆ Academic writing is a **collaborative endeavor**. While some academic writing merely reviews the state of scholarship on a subject, you are usually expected to synthesize material so that your point is advancing common scholarship rather than simply repeating the words of others. The overall goal is to improve collective knowledge.
- ◆ Often, academic writing must adhere to a particular **style guide**. This may be limited to document format and citations, or it may extend to use of particular language and inclusion of particular sections and structures. Common style guides are APA, MLA, Chicago, and so on.

Know your baseline with academic writing, and be able to adapt as needed—for example, you may use a more personal voice and less extensive evidence in a reflection paper, while still using the structure, style, and audience expected by academic writing. Knowing where to start, though, will help you make these adjustments comfortably, smoothly, and effectively.

*By John Dunham, M.S.
Virtual Writing Center Coordinator, Antioch University
Writing Center Coordinator, Antioch New England*