THE ACADEMIC WRITING – A PREREQUISITE CONDITION IN THE CULTURAL EVOLUTION OF THE ACADEMIC SOCIETY

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Abstract: Writing in an academic style is targeted for an informed and critical audience, based on closely investigated knowledge, and intended to appreciate an impersonal and dispassionate tone. Academic writing usually circulates within the academic world (the academy), but the academic writer may also find an audience outside via journalism, speeches, pamphlets and other means of communication. Academic writing is quite different from the chatty, conversational style we use when communicating with friends. It is also different from the type of writing we read in many newspapers or novels. It is more formal than other types of writing and it follows certain conventions. In the academic writing style one of the most important aspects is to keep our writing clear and concise and make sure that the audience will get our ideas over in a comprehensible form. While writing a scientific text there are issues that drive us on, such as creating new knowledge and gaining approval, but there are also things that hold us back, such as difficulties in getting started, revising the text, finding our voice and generally feeling inadequate.
The purpose of this article is not only to provide a reference guide to some of the most common mistakes in academic writing, but to also emphasize the necessity of the logic and beauty of language and of the clear and deep expression which have a positive impact on every aspect of the academic work.

Keywords: academic writing, academic style, academic community, writing structure and conventions.

The nature of university-level study has lately known new dimensions, not least because of technology, but one element has remained constant, guaranteeing success to professors and students with a mastery of it: writing. The undergraduate final paper, master's thesis, doctoral dissertation, specialist thesis are all of them considered to be written in an academic style. It is never too late to learn how to appreciate the logic and beauty of language, a good command of which will help us think more clearly and deeply, and have a positive impact on every aspect of our academic work.

Writing is at the very heart of academic life and good writing makes a complex professor or student[1]. This article is intended to provide useful guidance and helpful tips in order to persuade the reader to frame a clear expression of the plain sense of writing, not only at university level, but in the outside world as well.

If we analyze the texts of scientific structure it is obvious that there is a generally accepted way of writing them. The scientific text is precise, impersonal and objective. It typically uses the third person, the passive tense, complex terminology and various footnoting and referencing systems. Such matters are important when it comes to learning how to write scientific articles.

A good academic text should be well-researched, well-structured, and well-argued.

The target audience is an intelligent reader who does not know anything about the subject but may be familiar with the subject we select for debate and the main theories that are considered to be common knowledge.

The structure of a text starts with an introduction which motivates the reasons for which we approached a certain subject, the relevance and the innovation of proposals and

[1] Academic Writing and Publishing: A Practical Handbook, printed by University of Essex Printing Services, UK, 2008, p. 2

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suggestions. The subsequent chapters present and debate the main arguments in a logical order and the conclusion summarizes the final results, providing a critical assessment on the work and an outlook as well.

Umberto Eco's rules should be taken into consideration: "I've found on line a series of instructions on how to write well. I adopt them with a few variations because I think they could be useful to writers, particularly those who attend creative writing classes". There are useful tips taken over by the Italian writer and expressed in his book *How to Write a Thesis:*

Avoid clichés and express yourself in the simplest way.

Always remember that parentheses (even when they seem indispensable) interrupt the flow.

Limit the use of inverted commas. Quotes aren't "elegant".

Don't be repetitious; don't repeat the same thing twice; repeating is superfluous (redundancy means the useless explanation of something the reader has already understood).

Put, commas, in the appropriate places.

Recognize the difference between the semicolon and the colon, even if it's hard.

If you can't find the appropriate expression, refrain from using colloquial/dialectal expressions.

Be concise and try to express your thoughts with the least possible number of words, avoiding long sentences or sentences interrupted by incidental phrases that always confuse the reader, in order to avoid contributing to the general pollution of information, which is surely one of the tragedies of our media-dominated time.

Don't be emphatic and be careful with dots and exclamation marks.

Spell foreign names correctly, like Beaudelaire, Roosewelt, Niezsche and so on.

Do not change paragraph when unneeded. Not too often.

Do not write sentences in which the conclusion doesn't follow the premises in a logical way[2].

Elmore Leonard, one of the most popular and prolific American novelists of our time, found 10 tricks for a good writing:

1. Never open a book with weather.
2. Avoid prologues.
3. Never use a verb other than "said" to carry dialogue.
4. Never use an adverb to modify the verb "said"…he admonished gravely.
5. Keep your exclamation points under control. You are allowed no more than two or three per 100,000 words of prose.
6. Never use the words "suddenly" or "all hell broke loose".
7. Use regional dialect, patois, sparingly.
8. Avoid detailed descriptions of characters.
9. Don't go into great detail describing places and things.
10. Try to leave out the part that readers tend to skip[3].

Some main features of academic writing

It is often believed that academic writing, particularly scientific writing, is factual, simply to convey facts and information. However it is now recognized that an important feature of academic writing is the concept of cautious language, often called "hedging" or

[2] Umberto Eco, Cum se face o teză de licență, Editura Polirom, Iași, 2006, p. 213

[3] Elmore Leonard, Easy on the Adverbs, Exclamation Points and Especially Hooptedoodle, published in New York Times, July 16, 2001

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"vague language". In other words, it is necessary to make decisions about your stance on a particular subject, or the strength of the claims you are making. Different subjects prefer to do this in different ways.

We have selected some particular grammar issues related to language used in hedging:

Introductory verbs:		seem, tend, look like, appear to be, think, believe, doubt, be sure, indicate, suggest
Certain lexical verbs		believe, assume, suggest
Certain modal verbs:		will, must, would, may, might, could
Adverbs of frequency		often, sometimes, usually
Modal adverbs		certainly, definitely, clearly, probably, possibly, perhaps, conceivably,
Modal adjectives		certain, definite, clear, probable, possible
Modal nouns		assumption, possibility, probability
That clauses		It could be the case that . It might be suggested that . There is every hope that .
To-clause + adjective		It may be possible to obtain . It is important to develop . It is useful to study .

In order to illustrate the relevance of hedging expressions we shall compare the following:

The lives they chose may seem overly ascetic and self-denying to most women today.
The lives they chose seem overly ascetic and self-denying to most women today.

or

By analogy, it may be possible to walk from one point in hilly country to another by a path which is always level or uphill, and yet a straight line between the points would cross a valley.
By analogy, one can walk from one point in hilly country to another by a path which is always level or uphill, and yet a straight line between the points would cross a valley.

Gerald Graff, a professor of English and Education at the University of Illinois from Chicago, emphasized the writer's rational qualities in his *They Say/I Say: The Moves that Matter in Academic Writing* (with Cathy Birkenstein) (2005):

"To make an impact as a writer, you need to do more than make statements that are logical, well supported, and consistent. You must also find a way of entering a conversation with others' views with something 'they say.' . . . It follows, then, . . . that your own argument, the thesis or 'I say' moment of your text should always be a response to the arguments of others"[4].

Taking over this idea we should answer a question: Should we use personal or impersonal style?

Until quite recently, text books on scientific writing advised to use an impersonal style of writing rather than a personal style. An impersonal style uses: the passive voice, the third person rather than the first person (it rather than I or we) and things rather than people as subjects of sentences.

[4] Gerald Graff and Cathy Birkenstein, "They Say/I Say": The Moves That Matter in Academic Writing, 2nd. ed. W.W. Norton, 2010

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However, overuse of the passive voice may mean that our writing is less precise, and it may lead to writing which is more difficult to read because it is less natural than the active voice.

Times are changing, and in some disciplines and sub-disciplines of Science it is now quite acceptable to use the active voice, personal pronouns such as I and we, and to use people as subjects of sentences.

Examples of active and passive sentences:
Active: I observed the angle to be…
Passive: The angle was observed to be…
Active: The authors suggest…
Passive: It is suggested…
Active: We used a standard graphical representation to…
Passive: A standard graphical representation was used to…

Examples of the first and third person pronouns:
First person: I found…
Third person: It was found that…

First person: I assumed that…
Third person: It was assumed that…

Examples of persons or things as subjects:
Person as subject: I noticed…
Thing as subject: Analysis of the raw data indicated…
Person as subject: In this report I show…
Thing as subject: This report presents…[5]

The academic writing being a particular style of writing that we need to use when producing a good piece of work, should be:

- unnecessarily complicated
- objective and moral
- pompous, long-winded, technical
- impersonal, authoritative, humorless
- elitist and to exclude outsiders
- appropriate in specific circumstances
- easier for non-native speakers to follow.

Unity and cohesion within paragraphs are explained by clarity, each paragraph dealing with one idea and the information should relate to each other smoothly and logically. Unity and cohesion in the whole work, essay or thesis, should explore one clearly stated central idea and paragraphs should also be arranged in a logical order, developing the argument.

Experts say that there are many different ways of measuring the difficulty of writing an academic text. Three different kinds of measure (which can be used in combination) are: expert-based, reader-based and text-based.

Academic writing is all about accuracy and our choice of words should be made carefully. Always avoid using informal words and colloquial expressions as these don't look very professional. For example, try not to include contractions (can't, isn't) in our writing, simply write these out in full (cannot, is not). If we use any abbreviations, such as: OT, NC,

[5] http://www.monash.edu.au/lls/llonline/writing/science/1.5.xml

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make sure you have explained them in full first as well as showing our reader the abbreviation we will use: Occupational Therapy (OT), National Curriculum (NC).

Expert-based methods are ones that use experts to make assessments of the effectiveness of a piece of text. Referees, for example, are typically asked to judge the quality of an article submitted for publication in a scientific journal, and they frequently make comments about the clarity of the writing. Similarly, subject-matter experts are asked by publishers to judge the suitability of a manuscript submitted for publication in terms of content and difficulty.

Reader-based methods are ones that involve the actual readers in making assessments of the text. Readers might be asked to complete evaluation scales, to state their preferences for different versions of the same texts, to comment on sections of text that they find difficult to follow, or be tested on how much they can recall after reading a text.

Text-based measures are ones that can be used without recourse to experts or to readers, and these focus on the text itself. Such measures include computer-based readability formulae and computer-based measures of style and word use[6].

Practical guidelines for writing an academic text

Let's imagine that we are writing for a fellow colleague or for one of our students who is familiar with the conventions of our discipline, but who does not know our area. Readers need to be able to grasp what we did and what we found, and to follow our arguments easily.

Use the first rather than the third person. Here we have an example: 'We suggest that . . .' with 'This paper suggests that . . .'

Use short and simple words. It is easier to understand short, familiar words than technical terms that mean the same thing: 'We assume, from the start . . .' with 'We assume, a priori . . .'

Use active tenses. It is easier to understand text when writers use active tenses rather than

passive ones. Compare: 'We found that the chemists varied more than the engineers on a measure of extraversion . . .' with 'Greater variation was found on a measure of extraversion with the chemists than with the engineers . . .'

Sequencing in sentences. It is more helpful for the reader in English if the subject of the verb comes before, and the object after, the verb. Compare: 'Students need accessible information to become intelligent customers . . .' with 'To become intelligent customers, students need accessible information . . .'

Place sequences in order. Similarly, it is best to describe procedures in the order that they take place. For example, compare: 'Before the experiment commenced, we first briefed the participants on the necessary procedures and any precautions that they should take . . .' with 'We briefed the participants on the necessary procedures and any precautions that they should take before the experiment began . . .'

Avoid negatives. Negatives, especially double or treble ones, can be confusing. Compare:

'The figures provide no indication that the costs would not have been lower if competition had not been restricted . . .' with 'The figures provide no indication that competition would have produced higher costs . . .'. Negative qualifications can be used, however, for particular emphasis, and for correcting misconceptions.

Do not use contractions. Write in full.

[6] James Hartley, Academic Writing and Publishing: A Practical Handbook, Taylor & Francis e-Library, New York, 2008, p. 16

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Avoid abbreviations. Many writers use abbreviations for technical terms: for example RAE for research assessment exercise. Too many abbreviations on a page are off-putting. Furthermore, if the abbreviations are unfamiliar to the reader, it is easy for them to forget what they stand for. Write in full and use 'for example' instead of 'e.g.', unless you are using e.g. or i.e. in parenthesis.

Avoid overloading the text with references. It is difficult to read sentences that end with long lists of supporting references. It is better to cite only the more recent papers that between

them summarize earlier research.

Do not write long sentences. It is easier to understand short sentences than it is to understand long ones, because long sentences overload the memory system. However, it is good practice to vary sentence lengths, as long strings of short sentences[7].

As a rule, sentences less than twenty words long are probably fine. Sentences twenty to thirty words long are probably satisfactory. Sentences thirty to forty words long are suspect. Sentences with over forty words in them will probably benefit from re-writing.

Use short paragraphs. Short paragraphs are easier to read than long ones. Any typescript that has a page of text without at least one new paragraph needs attention!

Use numbers or bullets. Numbers or 'bullets' are useful if you want to make a series of points within a paragraph.

Use subheadings. Subheadings label sections so that writers and readers know where they are, and where they are going. Subheadings help the reader scan, select and retrieve material, as well as to recall it. Subheadings can be written in the form of statements or in the form of questions. If the subheadings are in the form of questions, then the text below must answer them. This helps the author to present, and the reader to follow the argument.

Print out and revise draft copies. Print out draft copies when the text is nearing completion. Copies allow us to check more easily the undetected mistakes or details: punctuation, capital letters, references and so on so fourth, as well as to get a better overview of the document as a whole.

When we find difficult to . . . If it is difficult to explain something, we need to think of how we would explain it to a particular person. We also need to think of what we would say, try saying it and then write this down. And after all these we will polish the text.

Ask other people to read your drafts. Colleagues and students may be willing to read and comment on drafts. Ask them to point out those sentences or sections that they think other readers might find it difficult to follow. People are more willing to point out difficulties for others than they are to admit to their own.

Revise continuously. Never regard the last version of the text as the final one. Put this version on one side and then come back to it a day or two later.

How to make quotations

The first quotations include current academic literature. Articles, newspapers and magazines are not considered appropriate literature, but can represent a source of data or public opinion. Books addressing practitioners are not considered suitable literature, except for selected definitions. Web sites and other publications from corporations need to be considered with caution. Not even Wikipedia entries are considered academic references. An important aspect of writing in an academic style relevates that the quotation of foreign intellectual property must be indicated. The source of any paragraph or idea that is not ours

[7] Umberto Eco, Op. Cit., p. 206

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must be precisely specified because plagiarism is a serious issue and may have unpleasant consequences.

Quotations are made within the text or in footnotes and have to be numbered consecutively throughout he text, with Arabic numbers. For in-text quotations we shall use quotation marks and indicate the exact page number of the quoted paragraph or sentence, for instance "…considerations of how Jewish the Ethiopians were and how easily they could adapt into their new environment" (Michael Corinaldi, p. 180). If more than one word is omitted, this has to be indicated by three dots (…). If we insert additional text to the direct quote, this must be indicated by placing it in brackets. If we translate a quotation from a foreign language we shall mention it. A useful piece of advice is to rephrase arguments taken from the literature in our own words, but not forgetting to indicate the original sources.

How to avoid plagiarism

Before speaking about plagiarism we need to understand some basics about copyright.

Plagiarism can be more than a bad academic practice, it can be a violation of the law if we break copyright. Here is what we need to understand to stay legal:

- as a general rule, facts cannot be copyrighted. This means that we are able to use any facts we find to support our writing.
- although facts are not subject to copyright, the words used to express them are, particularly if the wording is original or unique (copyright covers original expression).

We are free to use information from other materials in our articles, but we must use our own words to express it. To avoid this, we can take the existing facts and put them into our own words. There is a grace on how different the phrase can be. Adding a comma is not enough. However, changing the grammar around is.

If we must copy, we will not copy whole pages or paragraphs. Instead, we will put most of it into our own words, and quote the copied part. On the other hand, we will cite our source using the proper bibliography format. If we are worried something that we have might sound like someone else's, it is probably because it does.

Honestly writing a paper or an essay, the chances of plagiarizing another person's content are very slim. If we are conscious of the fact that we are copying someone else's work, then chances are that we will be caught.

A difference between plagiarizing and paraphrasing is needed to be made. Paraphrasing means taking another person's ideas and putting those ideas in our own words. Paraphrasing does not mean changing a word or two in someone else's sentence, changing the sentence structure while maintaining the original words, or changing a few words to synonyms. If we are tempted to rearrange a sentence in any of these ways, we are writing too close to the original. That's plagiarizing, not paraphrasing.

To conclude this presentation we may state again that we need to keep meticulous records and write up rough drafts of our academic text as we go along. Writing the text proper with the experimental chapters, progressing to the literature review, introduction and conclusions, writing the summary or abstract last, after writing the conclusions, writing clearly and directly, with the reader's expectations always in mind, frame a certain way to a successful work. Leading the reader from the known to the unknown, thinking, planning, writing and revising follow a complex pattern of the academic writing rule.

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