

Write Like a Scholar

Academic language is like a dialect; it's a subset of English that is used for a specific purpose—academic speaking and writing—and understood by a specific audience—academics. All students, regardless of whether English is their first language, need to learn new academic vocabulary upon entering university. Using a unified vocabulary is one way disciplines create community. When everyone is using the same language, it's easier to share ideas and engage in conversation.

“Learning academic language is not learning new words to do the same thing that one could have done with other words; it is learning to do new things with language and acquiring new tools for these new purposes” (Nagy & Townsend 2012, 93).

What is academic language?

Academic language is sometimes classified into two categories: general and discipline-specific.

1. **General academic language** refers to words that can be found commonly in academic writing across disciplines and are distinct from informal or conversational words (e.g., analyse, study, concept, data).
2. **Discipline-specific language** refers to words that are used in specific fields of study, like technical terms or content-specific words (e.g., organism, geometry, existential).

Research suggests that **it is more useful for students to develop discipline-specific academic language** since words that are considered part of general academic language are often used differently in different disciplines.

Consider the word, “code.” In computing, “to code” means to program a device with a set of instructions. In law, it can refer to a legal document, like “a code of conduct.” In social sciences, it can refer to a set of cultural values that a group of people adhere to collectively and voluntarily, as in “the society followed a moral code.”

This example highlights not only the way in which words vary across disciplines, but also introduces **the importance of grouping words together to understand their meaning.**

Lexical bundles, as they're sometimes called, are groups of two or more words that academics frequently put together. They're not idioms or expressions, but common ways of communicating ideas. **Examples:** “within the context of,” “according to the literature,” “given that,” “the results of which show,” this study suggests,” etc.

These bundles are common features of academic language because they effectively and concisely convey meaning by using common and conventional word pairings that readers in the discipline recognize. In other words, using words in common expressions from your discipline is not lazy or unimaginative; it's a way to be sure your audience understands your intended message.

How do I learn academic language?

Like any language, academic language cannot be learned overnight. Here are some strategies to use over time to help you develop increasing awareness of the ways scholars in your field write and build your own academic vocabulary.

Learn new words in context.

Words in English only have full meaning when understood in a text. When you come across a new word, pay attention to what words are around it. You can keep track of academic vocabulary in a [lexical notebook](#).

Pair learning new words and phrases with learning content.

Use textbook glossaries and disciplinary encyclopaedias to understand key terms related to a concept as you are learning about the concept. You can find these for each subject on the [Queen's Library website](#).

Familiarize yourself with how your field organizes and structures information in written format.

Knowing which words to use is only half the battle; you also have to know when, where, and how to use them. Pay attention to the typical structure of writing in your field and try to notice where in texts word groupings occur frequently. Use the [disciplinary analysis tool](#) to help you.

Consider the function of the words you need.

All words serve a purpose, whether it be to explain, define, introduce, counter, illustrate, or any number of other things. When you find yourself searching for a word or phrase, reflect on what you need that word to do, then use a resource like the [academic phrasebank](#) to search for language that fits that purpose.

Practice.

You might find that you understand words when you read but then have a hard time remembering the words when you sit down to write. In language learning, comprehension of words almost always comes before the ability to produce the words yourself. When you find a text that exemplifies the way you would like to write, take some time to practice modelling. Try [paraphrasing](#) or writing a summary that incorporates the language you want to add to your vocabulary.

Key strategies

Concision

Academics strive for concision in their writing. **To be concise means to convey a message with the most effective, clear, and accurate words to fully describe an idea.** Avoiding vague or value-laden words and using transition words thoughtfully are two ways expert writers show concision. **Consider this example:**

The city council introduced a new initiative on active transportation. This is the best. Moreover, it solves the traffic problem.

The subject of the second sentence, *this*, is unclear, and the evaluation that “this” is “the best” is unsupported and shows the writer’s personal stance. The transition, “moreover,” incorrectly suggests that the writer is introducing a secondary point that builds off the first. See how this second version corrects these errors:

The city council introduced a new initiative on active transportation. This initiative offers a cost-effective solution to the problem of traffic congestion.

By naming the subject of the second sentence, specifying what about the initiative is good, and getting rid of the inaccurate transition word, the second version does a better job of conveying the writer’s intended message. Refer to the [eliminating wordiness resource](#) for inspiration on other strategies to produce concise writing.

Canadian academic writing culture is a **writer-responsible culture**, which means it is the writer’s job to establish a clear understanding for the reader. Concision is a characteristic of good writing because it is one way for writers to ensure they have clarified their position for the reader. Academics tend to show the reader their position through guiding words like hedges, boosters, and scope markers.

Hedges and boosters

Part of writing critically is to be able to maintain credibility with your reader. Expert writers tend to construct more limited arguments that show respect towards other views and competing positions. They do this partly by using a balance of boosters and hedges.

- **Boosters:** words that express certainty and leave little room for other views
Examples: absolutely, clearly, should, must, very, never, always, certain, more than, a lot, conclusively
- **Hedges:** words and phrases that express caution and are open to alternative perspectives
Examples: possibly, may, might, often, generally, likely, somewhat, almost, nearly, perhaps, suggests, relatively, tends to, for the most part

Expert writers tend to use hedges at a much higher frequency than novice writers, which contributes to an ethos of caution, humility, and diplomacy, rather than too much certainty. Expert writers use boosters mostly to emphasize an idea.

Scope

These are words or phrases that indicate the extent to which an argument can be applied. They are used to **indicate precision and focus**.

Scope shows **engagement with the world of research**, rather than just the world in general. Expert writers tend to use phrases that keep them in this text-internal world of discourse, while novice writers tend to refer to the broader text-external world.

For example, when you say: “Childhood development is significant in society”, you are using language to refer to the “real world” outside of textual research. But when you say: “In this study, childhood development is examined,” you are referring to the world of research, which is where you want your focus to be in academic discourse.

You can also indicate scope through nouns. Novice writers tend to use general nouns (people, the world, our society), while expert writers tend to **qualify nouns to make them more specific and focused** (young people, the Arab world, democratic society).

Do you use these?

Although not ungrammatical or objectively wrong, these phrases are not common in academic language. Review your writing for these elements and ask yourself, “Is this the choice I want to make? Is this adding value to my writing?”

- **Clichés, and cultural references**
Example: piece of cake (idiom) or gone to the dark side (cultural reference from the Star Wars films)
- **Contractions**
Example: ‘don’t’ instead of ‘do not’
- **Similes and metaphors**
Examples: They’re pretty like a flower. (simile)
She’s a machine. (metaphor)
- **Rhetorical questions**
Example: She hates cake. *Who knew?*
- **Interjections**
Example: Wow!
- **Phrasal verbs**
Example: ‘go over’ instead of ‘review’

References

Aull, L. 2015. *First-Year University Writing: A Corpus-based study with implications for pedagogy*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Nagy, W. and D. Townsend. 2012. “Words as Tools: Learning Academic Vocabulary as Language Acquisition.” *Reading Research Quarterly* **47** (1): 91-108.



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