

What makes English 'academic'?

# Some definitions

‘academy’ = place of study, university

‘academic’ = doing things the way they are done in the academy

‘academic writing’ = writing in the way that is expected of people at a university

So what makes spoken or written English 'academic' is not the ideas but the way the ideas are **presented** and **expressed**.

# How are ideas presented?

- in a logical order
- with evidence to support them
- objectively

# How are ideas expressed?

- using formal language without any slang or colloquial expressions
- using specialist vocabulary where appropriate
- using words and phrases that are expected in writing by people at university

# 'in a logical order'

- start with a plan
- jot down any ideas that you have as you think of them
- group your ideas about the same point together and present them in the same paragraph
- start each paragraph with a sentence that shows what you are going to write about in that paragraph – the topic sentence
- put your points in order so that they follow on from each other
- develop the main idea in the topic sentence with your other points

# ‘with evidence’

- read and make notes from different sources
- use sources that are reliable and/or recommended to you
- make notes of where different writers agree or disagree so that you can compare different views
- remember that things are usually more grey than black and white

# 'objectively'

- make suggestions, not strongly emotional comments
- avoid stating your personal opinion
- do not involve the reader directly by asking questions



# 'using formal language'

- write in full sentences
- do not use abbreviations or contractions
- use impersonal forms

# ‘use specialist vocabulary’

- check the meaning of specialist terms in your subject
- note examples of how these terms are used in the books and articles that you read
- do not use terms that you do not understand

‘use words and phrases that are expected’

- academic writers are expected to be cautious
- readers expect phrases that act as signposts to guide them through the text

An example of an academic study

**Effectiveness of speed cameras in preventing road traffic collisions and related casualties: systematic review**

*British Medical Journal (2005)*

*From the conclusion of the article*

This review **impersonal** has highlighted the limited nature of the evidence base underpinning the large scale introduction of speed cameras and the need for further **robust** evidence. **Topic sentence** Two possibilities **Signpost** exist for improving this evidence base. **Development of topic with evidence** Randomised controlled trials offer the highest form of evidence. In countries where a large scale introduction of speed cameras is planned and the subject is not politicised, speed cameras could be introduced **cautious suggestion** in a controlled fashion, randomising the allocation of cameras within a larger sampling framework **technical term** of high risk sites (with remaining sites serving as controls). **First possibility**

However, this approach may not **cautious suggestion** be feasible in most settings because of political and other local pressures. **Counter argument** In such settings, an alternative may be **cautious suggestion** to carry out any planned introduction of speed cameras in a phased manner spread over a few years with careful collection of data on collisions and injuries, hence producing a natural comparison group (wedge shaped study design).

**Technical term** **Second possibility** In either case, **Signpost points back** the research needs to be conducted as soon as possible, before the widespread introduction of cameras results in a permanent loss of such opportunities. **Conclusion**

# What can I do to make my writing more academic?

- note how the ideas in the books and articles that you read on your course are presented and expressed
- attend free workshops and drop-in sessions offered by Learner Support at Birkbeck (details on the [My Birkbeck](#) website)
- enrol for a short course focussing on writing

# Birkbeck offers....

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*Remember that it takes practice to become good at something!*