

1. The practices of writing

In this book, we cover writing both in English linguistics and English literary and cultural studies, since these are the two areas in which most students who study *Anglistik* write papers. While there are significant differences in terms of the formalities, methodologies, and of course content between the two disciplines, they also share many similarities that apply to all academic writing. Therefore, before we look at the specifics of writing in linguistics and writing in literary and cultural studies, this first part introduces the main principles of academic writing.

It was important to us that we enable you – our students – to develop a solutions-oriented sense of your personal writing strategies which you can adapt to different challenges and priorities, rather than presenting a deficiency-oriented collection of ideal outcomes and normative formal rules to achieve them. This requires us to take a pragmatic view on the role of student writing in academia. In section 1.1 *Why academic writing is hard*, we acknowledge that it can be difficult for students to think about themselves as writers of *academic* texts because student writing usually consists of producing isolated texts which are objects of evaluation and grading – which is quite different from the writing professional scholars do. But understanding the purpose of professional scholarship will help you to write well and with confidence.

In section 1.2 *Academic writing means joining a conversation*, we focus on the fact that scholars never do their research in isolation: The academic work of others provides the context for your own research, be it that they provide you with the concepts, theories, and methods you use, that they have put forward a position you disagree with, or that your research interest is defined by a research gap, something no one has looked at so far. If you understand your research process as taking part in a conversation, it becomes easier to understand the purpose of the conventional language features (academic register) or the codes of conduct (referencing and giving credit)

of that conversation. In section 1.3 *Finding literature* we address the research strategies that help you ‘find your conversation’: Who has written on the topic before? What sources might be relevant and usable in your project to help you say what you want to say?

In school, most of your writing will have been done in one go. In university, the complexity of academic writing is so much greater that it requires several steps of drafting, revising, rewriting, editing, and finalizing. In section 1.4 *Text in progress*, we introduce various strategies for these steps, which you can try out in order to find out what works for you.

Because academic writing is a complex process and requires you to develop and substantiate a scholarly position, cookie-cutter approaches don’t really work. Different writers use different strategies to arrive at their final texts. Understanding your own individual processes and strategies of writing is key to becoming a confident academic writer. That’s why we close this first part with section 1.5 *How to become an expert on your own writing*.

1.1 Why academic writing is hard

If students struggle with academic writing, they tend to think that there is something wrong with them. Let us assure you: there isn’t. Academic writing often *is* hard, whether you are writing your first three-page essay or your Ph.D. dissertation. We say this to acknowledge that this is a normal experience which many writers of academic texts share and that it is not a sign of any personal inadequacy. Academic writing is hard because you are asked to adopt the role and voice of an expert in your discipline and to convincingly defend your position while taking the positions of other scholars into account. In doing all this, you also need to adhere to various standards of form, language, and referencing.

Adopting the role and voice of an expert in your discipline is especially challenging for students, who often feel – and are being told – that they are anything but experts. This is why students who write academic texts often feel like impostors: They are asked to occupy a position with authority without actually having that authority. It is hard to find your own voice when you have learned everything – the things you know as well as the language and the vocabulary used to present that knowledge – from other voices.

.....

Writing as a student means that you have to pretend to write as if you were doing meaningful research and as if the addressees of your text were fellow scholars interested in your ideas. But your only actual reader – your supervisor – usually doesn't treat you as a fellow scholar and is less interested in your ideas than in your academic writing proficiency. What you produce when you write academic texts is not an actual contribution to your discipline's academic discourse but an object of evaluation. At first glance, this might sound only natural, a normal aspect of the learning process, but this contradiction in purpose can hinder students from thinking of themselves as scholars, which is what university training is all about.

There are many strategies that you can use in order to deal with these difficulties once you are aware of them. This is why this book prioritizes strategies that enable you to express your ideas and enhance your sense of agency as a writer over a detailed listing of rules and formalities.

Academic writing will always be hard, but we strongly believe that the process of collecting, testing, and honing strategies to master its various challenges is empowering. In our experience, it is rewarding to learn how to express your ideas and findings in the language and form that is taken seriously among other professionals.

1.2 Academic writing means joining a conversation

The rules students are expected to follow in their papers can seem arbitrary or overly pedantic. This section is about the reasons behind these rules because we believe that it will become easier for you to implement them if you understand what their underlying purpose is.

Academic writing is about transparency: The first important thing to keep in mind is what distinguishes science from mere opinion or belief: its processes of establishing knowledge are based on specific methods accepted by the academic community, and its findings are presented in a way that makes it possible for other people to examine and check those findings using the same methods or approaches. That's why it is so important in any kind of academic work that you be transparent about your theoretical framework,

your methods, how you arrived at your results, and what other authors you relied on and referred to. This holds true whether you are conducting experiments in physics, doing sociolinguistic field research, or presenting a semiotic analysis of a cultural product. Transparency is the reason why it is so vital that you describe your methodology properly for a linguistics paper, that you provide definitions and present your theoretical framework in cultural studies papers, and that you always cite all your sources.

Academic writing is about defending positions: The second important thing to keep in mind is that, contrary to popular belief, academic work is not simply about fact-finding but about establishing, defending, and criticizing positions. If you believe that scientific work is about finding facts, then you'll look mostly for the facts authors present in the texts you read and you'll be mostly concerned with presenting facts when you yourself write academic texts. But before something can count as a fact, it must be proposed, contested, defended, and eventually accepted by the scientific community. This is what all academics, be they biologists, linguists, theologians, or literary scholars, do: propose a position for others in their discipline to either accept or reject. Only if their position meets acceptance by their fellow scholars does it become a fact or a piece of knowledge.

Academic writing means joining a conversation: A useful way of thinking about this process of proposing and defending positions is that it is an ongoing long-distance conversation or debate, and that with every text you write to present your research you join an ongoing conversation within your scholarly community.¹ Whatever you write is in some way a contribution to this conversation: maybe you provide an answer to a question that came up in this conversation, you dispute a claim someone else has made, you demonstrate a specific application of a concept that has been discussed, or you raise an issue that has been overlooked so far.

1 We have adopted the idea that academic writing means entering into a conversation from Gerald Graff and Cathy Birkenstein's book *They Say / I Say*. We owe much of this section to their way of thinking.

When you think about your writing not as just expressing something you want to say but as a response to something others have said, you'll find it easier to distinguish between your own position and that of others. Your readers will better understand *why* you are writing when they understand how your position relates to a position others have proposed.²

Most of the things you actually do in academic writing make more sense when you see yourself as entering a conversation: you write an introduction in order to position yourself within this conversation; you cite other authors either to support your position or to dispute their position because these are the people who have so far contributed to the discussion; you summarize concepts and arguments by authors you refer to in order to make clear what part of what they said you are addressing; you make claims and support them with evidence in order to convince others of your position.

From the idea that academic writing means joining a conversation two things follow that are characteristic of every well-written academic text: (1) you make your contribution as a researcher visible (you don't just present other people's thoughts), and (2) you show how this contribution connects to the things other researchers have done and claimed (you don't just present your own thoughts in isolation). If you want to be a voice in a conversation, then your own voice must be distinguishable from other voices, but the conversation you are contributing to must also be visible.

1.2.1 Academic register

This conversation you are joining is conducted in a specific style of writing called 'academic register,' which distinguishes it, for instance, from journalistic texts or blog posts. 'Academic register' consists of a set of stylistic conventions that belong to the genre of academic texts just like the use of colloquial language and emoji belong to text chats. Observing the genre conventions of academic

2 You can test this next time you read an academic text: Instead of just asking what the author's argument or research results are, see if the text makes more sense when you ask what position the author is responding to.