

What is academic english?

Sociology, Communication



What is academic English? You may be confident in using English in everyday situations, but the kind of English you need for study is rather different. It is what is known as 'academic English' and is the type of English you need for * reading and understanding your study materials * writing about your subject. Academic English is different from everyday spoken English. It may be used to * describe an object or situation * describe a process or how something works * explain something. Much of academic English is about expressing the relationship between ideas. Although the language may be more complex than in everyday English, good academic writers aim to be as clear, precise and simple as possible. They think about what their readers know already, and aim to guide them towards less familiar areas and topics. The ability to write in an academic style is something you develop as part of your university study. It is difficult to give overall 'rules' on the way to write for a university course, as academic subjects vary in * their vocabulary and expressions * the types of text used (for instance essays, reports, research articles or summaries) * how these texts are structured and organised. Listen to tutors discuss the importance of academic English. Sign in to view this video Main features of academic English * is usually formal in tone and impersonal in style * avoids contractions or shortened forms of verbs, such as won't, doesn't or it's * avoids using a linking word such as 'and' or 'but' at the beginning of a sentence * avoids personal pronouns such as I, me, you, your * may use the passive form of verbs * avoids verbs that are composed of multiple words, such as 'give up', 'put up with' * tends to employ a cautious way of explaining findings, using expressions such as 'may', 'it is possible that...',

'could' * may use specialised vocabulary. Use of language When you seek to convince, persuade or otherwise change other people's minds, the language you use is extremely important. Each word is a little packet of meaning from which the other person infers understanding. It gets even more complex when words combine in the semantics of entire sentences. * Figures of speech: Subtle use of language. * Metaphor: Using other worlds to describe this one. * Modifying meaning: Changing meaning to change minds. * Parts of speech: Lots of detail on using nouns, verbs, etc. * Persuasive language: Particular methods of persuading with words. * Special language: Used in conversion and retention within groups. * Using syntax: The structure and types of sentences. * Using punctuation: Subtlety that changes meaning.

Effective Use of Language The Importance of Language As a writer, it is important not only to think about what you say, but how you say it. To communicate effectively, it is not enough to have well organized ideas expressed in complete and coherent sentences and paragraphs. One must also think about the style, tone and clarity of his/her writing, and adapt these elements to the reading audience. Again, analyzing one's audience and purpose is the key to writing effectiveness. In order to choose the most effective language, the writer must consider the objective of the document, the context in which it is being written, and who will be reading it.

Characteristics of Effective Language There are six main characteristics of effective language. Effective language is: (1) concrete and specific, not vague and abstract; (2) concise, not verbose; (3) familiar, not obscure; (4) precise and clear, not inaccurate or ambiguous; (5) constructive, not destructive; and (6) appropriately formal. Concrete and Specific Language

Concrete language includes descriptions which create tangible images with details the reader can visualize. Abstract language is vague and obscure, and does not bring to mind specific visual images. Consider the two sets of statements below. The statement at the top is abstract, but the statements become increasingly concrete and specific toward the bottom. He is a bad roommate He is lazy and discourteous He is untidy and unclean He doesn't clean up his own messes He leaves his dirty dishes on the kitchen counter Your relationship with John is unacceptable You do not get along well with John You and John have a lot of arguments You and John insult each other too much You and John call each other derogatory names Notice how much more effective the statements become as the language becomes more specific and concrete. The statements at the top, which are more abstract, can be interpreted in many possible ways, and leave many questions answered. The statements at the bottom, which are more concrete, are less open to multiple interpretations. Concise Language A hallmark of effective writers is the ability to express the desired message in as few words as possible. Good writers, in other words, use language which is straightforward and to-the-point. Consider the following examples. (1) It is widely discussed by employees that many of them will be forced to change jobs and take on new responsibilities when the merger takes place between the two companies. (2) Before making a decision about whether the person on trial is guilty or innocent in this case, the members of the jury should be sure to carefully think about, ponder and reflect on all of the important and relevant testimony in the case. Notice how long-winded these sentences are, and how easily they could be shortened and simplified. An important part of revising

and editing involves re-phrasing sentences to eliminate excessive wordiness. One way to reduce wordiness is to eliminate redundant words or phrases. Consider example one above. The phrases " to change jobs" and " take on new responsibilities" are redundant, and could be combined into one short phrase to be expressed more concisely. Consider example two above. The phrase "... should be sure to carefully think about, ponder and reflect on..." contains three ways of saying the same thing. This sentence could be improved by using only one of the key phrases: "... to reflect on..." A second way to reduce wordiness is to eliminate " filler" words which serve no purpose in the sentence. Consider example one above. Replace the phrase "... when the merger takes place between the two companies" with "... when the two companies merge." Consider example two above. Notice the excessive wordiness in the following phrase: " Before making a decision about whether the person on trial is guilty or innocent in this case ..." This sentence could simply read: " Before determining the defendant's guilt or innocence..."

Familiar Language Familiar language is that which the readers easily recognize and understand because they use it on a regular basis. One of the most important functions of language is to build " homophily" or a sense of commonality with one's readers. Language which is foreign and unfamiliar to the reader tends to emphasize the differences between writer and reader, and makes the message difficult to understand. By using language that is familiar to the reader, the message is likely to have more impact. Consider the following examples. An assignment given to a class of business students by their philosophy professor: " The presently assigned paper necessitates an eloquently articulated analysis of the Existentialist

perspective as it pertains to contemporary living. You should adumbrate the points which represent the sine qua non of your analysis." A letter sent to high school students warning them of the risks of an unhealthy diet: "Individuals who maintain a diet of high fat content are exposed to an increased risk of developing atherosclerosis, which is a buildup of fat deposits on the inner walls of the arteries. This condition can reduce or cut off the flow of blood in the arteries serving the major organs of the body. This can lead to poor health." In both examples above, the language that is used is unfamiliar to the readers. As a result, the message loses its impact.

Precise and Clear Language The use of appropriate language is a tricky matter because the meaning of words is relative and situational. In other words, words can be interpreted in different ways by different people in different situations. For this reason, it is important to choose language which is as precise and clear as possible. The more precise and clear one's use of language becomes, the fewer the number of possible interpretations for a message. Consider the following words. What numerical value would you assign to each of them? If something is "probable" what percentage of the time does it occur? P > (1) probable (2) doubtful (3) certainly (4) unlikely (5) perhaps Would other people assign the same value to these words as you did? In actuality, the range of values varies greatly because these terms are relative: they can mean different things to different people in different situations. How could one be more precise in his/her use of these terms? Consider the examples below. Notice that these terms can vary widely in the meaning to different people. The best way to use such relative terms, then, is to compare them to something concrete and "known" to the reader. For

example: "Is that Acura an expensive car?" is best answered with a comparison: "Compared to that Honda, the Acura is expensive. Compared to that Lexus, it is inexpensive." expensive hot intelligent good spicy Consider the following examples. Note the potential confusion or ambiguity in these phrases. (1) Why the student body should continue in this state of apathy is not really understandable. (2) Our student body is dull and slack-minded. (3) The practice and theory of politics are studied in the classroom but political habits on campus do not seem to benefit from such labor. (4) He's an interesting individual. (5) It is difficult to estimate the number of people affected by AIDS. Each of the following are actual headlines printed in newspapers. Notice their double meaning. (1) Include your children when Baking Cookies (2) Safety Experts Say School Buss Passengers should be Belted (3) Bank Drive-in Window Blocked by Board (4) Killer Sentenced to Die for Second Time in Ten Years (5) Eye Drops Off Shelf In short, it is wise to think carefully about your choice of words and their potential interpretations. To communicate effectively, precise and clear language is essential.

Constructive Language Constructive language phrases a potentially negative message in a positive way, whereas destructive language directs blame and criticism toward the reader, creating defensiveness. Readers are likely to become defensive when the writer's language expresses any or all of the following: * Superiority over the reader * Indifference or apathy about an issue of importance to the reader * Negative evaluation or judgment of the reader (as opposed to neutral descriptions or observations) * Command or control over the reader * Skepticism or doubt about the reader's credibility or the legitimacy of their claims Consider the following examples. (1) Boss to

employee: " Your job performance recently has been unacceptable and there are no excuses for it. You have claimed that you are having some serious personal problems, but even if this is true, you cannot allow it to affect the quality of your work. If your work doesn't improve, I'll have to replace you with someone else." (2) Student to instructor: " You have confused me so badly with your lectures that I don't know what to do. I am considering dropping out and taking the class next quarter from Dr. Johnstone, who can explain the information much more clearly. I don't want to drop out, but I have never been so frustrated with an instructor in my whole life." (3) Instructor to student: " I have never had a student who was so confused with this material. Perhaps you should take an easier course from an easier professor. It makes no difference to me." Why would these examples create defensiveness in the reader? How could you change the use of language to make these examples more constructive? Formality of Language The formality of the language one uses should match the formality of the situation and the relationship between the writer and reader. Consider the following examples. Very Formal: Exceedingly large segments of the population are expressing their discontent with medical practitioners who appear to more engrossed in amassing financial assets than in providing efficacious care to people with health disorders. Formal: A large number of consumers are complaining about medical doctors who are apparently more interested in making money than in provide effective health care. Informal: A lot of people are unhappy with their doctors who only seem to care about how much money they make, and not about giving their patients good care. Notice that any of the three examples could be effective, depending upon

the reader, the writer's relationship with the reader, and the situation. Under what conditions might you want to use these different levels of formality?

Notice the difference in formality between the two words shown in pairs below. Either word might be equally appropriate, depending upon the reader and situation. utilize use transpire happen facilitate help expedite quicken impediment obstacle comprehend understand erroneous mistaken

exacerbate worsen Style — the nature of Academic English Academic English is plain, simple, straightforward language. Sometimes students write

sentences with so many clauses and commas that is hard to understand the meaning. When there are also grammar mistakes from an international

student, it makes it worse. Here's a paragraph from a journal article which I've used with some students recently: It is generally agreed that overseas

students are at a severe disadvantage in coping with a new education system. From various aspects, many studies reported the difficulties

experienced by overseas students with their academic progress. Elkerton (1985) highlighted the extent of thesis supervision for overseas students. His

research showed that, in general, overseas students require more intensive supervision than the native students. Barker et al (1991) reported the

difficulties faced by a sample of Chinese students with tutorials. Felix and Lawson (1994) found that overseas students often experience stresses and

problems not only with tutorials (including lectures, seminars, but also with laboratory work and essay writing up. Li, R and Kaye, M (1998)

Understanding Overseas Students' Concerns and Problems, Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management, Vol 20, No 1, 1998 Read it? Fine. It's not

very difficult to understand because the sentences are quite short and easily

structured. In most sentences you can see quite simply: subject | verb | object | Overseas students | are | at a disadvantage in coping with a new education system. | Many studies | reported | the difficulties experienced by overseas students. | Elkerton | highlighted | the extent of thesis supervision for overseas students. | His research | showed | that overseas students require more supervision. | In fact it is remarkable how simple the structures are here! If you are writing a literature review look no further for how to do it! Looking at sentences like this — subject — verb — and the rest — can help you check for agreement between the subject and verb and can also help you understand complex sentences when you are reading. Keep it simple! As usual I will leave you with a link to read around the subject a bit more. Today's link is to Napier University in Edinburgh with some useful comments about academic writing style. The use of language is commonplace in the world today, and has been since the dawn of recorded time. We take our use of language for granted; it is something that occurs naturally to us. Or does it? Why do we use language? Is the spoken word the only type of language that we as humans use? And is language and communication limited to humans, or do animals use language as we humans do? An examination of these questions may help to dispel some of our ideas and conceptions of how we communicate with the world around us. Why do we use language? The why and the how of language use has been mulled over by linguists throughout the centuries. Jean Aitchison summarized that language is used to dispense information, give commands, express emotional feelings and responses, social conversing, word play and poetry, and to talk about language. (1996, 17) Aitchison added more uses

could be added, but these seem to be the primary uses. Charles Darwin suggested that language evolved from enabling of "thought" that transcended from the calls and cries of animals to the discovery of the ability to use vocal organs as a means of conveying wants and needs and ideas as man's grasp of the world around him grew and made communication increasingly needed. (Origins, 1871) The role of language can perhaps be summed up in three subheadings: * Interpersonal communication: Can be classed as Verbal and non-verbal language, communication between a mother and her baby as well as other classifications. It can be affected by gender, emotional and geographic origins. Often defined as unintentional and intentional linguistics. * Language within a person: This embodies such aspects of humanity as thought, rationalization, creativity, memory, self-direction and expression and humor. * Language and society: formed on the building blocks of the other subheadings, this is how we define our place in the world. Our culture and belief structures are directly formed and enhanced by language of ourselves and those around us. What is clear is language can not be traced to any one event or person. There is no set or universally accepted definition of language. Nature has given most species the ability to communicate, and most of these abilities are unique to the given species. Smith and Miller contend that 'the purpose of communication is the preservation, growth, development of the species'. (1968: 265) Information exchange is apparent in all species forms of communication. Smith and Miller assert that many species show and share some of the features that characterize human language. But most interesting there is one tantalizing morsel of information

that most scholars tend to agree upon. The marked separation of human and non-human communication seems to hinge upon the behavioral system of the various species. It is agreed that animals react instinctively, whereas humans react voluntarily. It is generally taken as a given that only humans have language. Or do they? All animals, including humans, engage in various forms of social communication. All species share in basic functions, not including the advantage that spoken language may provide humans. It is this supposed difference that separates us as humans from the "animals of the jungle". However, the example of the longevity of chimpanzees as a species would be able to 'speak in human terms' indicates the need for spoken language is not a criteria for survival in animals that are so similar to humans. Determining the differences of human and animal communication and being able to describe how these forms of communication contrast have been a difficult endeavor. The noted linguist Charles Hockett designed and implemented a checklist highlighting the features that human communication possesses, and this format has been widely accepted (1967: 574-580). Hockett's main components of this list are: * Duality of pattern (the combinations of phonetics and grammar) * Productivity (ability to create and understand the beginnings of speech) * Arbitrariness (sign/symbols do not resemble what they represent) * Interchangeability (to be able to give and get messages by exchanging roles) * Specialization (only function is communication) * Displacement (ability to refer to the past and to things not in the sight line) * Cultural transmissions (ability to teach/learn by imitation) Hockett theory would possibly lead us to the conclusion that animal and human communication is alike in numerous ways, and that these areas

should be investigated to prove that human and non-human communication is similar, if not of the same ilk. Ronald Wardhaugh has brought forward another argument into the arena. He states that the very influential Naom Chomsky had suggested a counter viewpoint to that of Hockett. Chomsky concluded that an element of the human mind is dedicated to language and is therefore in the genetic make-up of human beings. This element would make it possible to use a set of rules to build up countless structures of sentences, and could not be found in any other species. Chomsky believed that human communication and what makes it unique is far more worthy of investigation than concerning ones self with the similarities of human and animal communication. (1993: 18-26 and 61-64). Chomsky may have fallen short with his conclusions, however. His viewpoint would directly stand in counterpoint to the theory of evolution. In and of itself, Chomsky' viewpoint would suggest a unilateral approach to this conundrum. Are humans unique in this aspect? This aforementioned question has sparked debate for many years in the scientific community and has coalesced into two different schools of thought. One school of thought aligns itself to Chomsky and others who share his view that language is segregated to the human's only venue. Another school suggests quite the opposite, that at least to some degree, some apes and chimps have demonstrated an ability to use language, although not a spoken human language. The primates have used American Sign Language (ASL) to communicate, and Koko the lowland gorilla has even invented her own language which her facilitators have called Gorilla Sign Language (GSL). E. Sue Savage-Rumbaugh, a noted Georgia State University (USA) biology professor, in a keynote address at the American Association for

the Advancement of Science, made reference to idea that conventional teachings had produced a negative connotation to study of simian communication and therefore approached any claims from this research with a biased eye. However, she added that modern studies were beginning to give credence to the simian research. The research that Savage-Rumbaugh and her colleagues have undertaken has shown that apes do seem to understand sign language. Observations noted that apes have no vocal tracks, so human speech is impossible. Savage-Rumbaugh made use of a keyboard with more than 400 symbols to communicate with her subjects. She contends that if you talk to the simians and point out the symbols, they will understand language just as if two humans were talking. (Savage-Rumbaugh, Rumbaugh and Boysen, 1980) In Savage-Rumbaugh's studies, work with a chimp named Lana with showed that the chimp was able to learn language in a meaningful context. Later work with a bonobo named Matata, led to the accidental exposure of Matata's son Kanzi to the language. It was discovered that Kanzi was able to produce a limited amount of the language without training, and of his own accord. This led to the conclusion that 'bonobos possess rudimentary syntactical ability' and that 'their responses were not reflexive' Further evidence in support of the theory that humans are not unique to language can be taken from the study of Koko the lowland gorilla. Koko was taught American Sign Language and has, according to the Gorilla Foundation, a working vocabulary of 2000 signs. Interestingly, Koko has communicated with person's other than her keepers and has demonstrated to them communicative ability. Many years ago, personal observation of the gorilla noted that after the death of her kitten, Koko

communicated an understanding of the concept of death and that her kitten was gone forever. She expressed grief and pain over the death, and was able to communicate her memory of the kitten in her day to day existence. Even more curiously, she was asked if she wanted a new kitten, and when she picked a new one out of a litter, Koko was able to make comparisons of her first kitten and the new addition. This observation alone would seem to refute the idea that only humans are capable of language, as Koko displayed the Displacement, which is one of the main points of Hockett's list of human communication processes.

Conclusion We use language to communicate ideas and express feelings. We use it to describe the world around us and how we perceive it. We learn to communicate as our bodies mature. We learn many ways to say the same word, but to make it have many different meanings and contexts. But to say that we as human beings are the only species to be able to communicate is absurd. Every species has the ability to communicate, and it is only human arrogance that has determined that ours is the only true language, simply based in what we have ascertained is cognitive thought. We are limited in our realization that we are only one of many species, and that perhaps it is safer to think that because we can't understand what an animal thinks, then there is no way that can be as smart as we think we are.

What Is Correct English? What is correct English? What does it mean to speak correctly? Very simply, correct language usage is that which conveys to your intended audience the impression you would like to give them. If your readers or listeners are college professors or academic colleagues, the appropriate language is a fairly formal variety of Standard English (SE). The deference due to business contacts and clients also merits

a fairly polished level of language usage, while other environments may demand very different modes of communication. This preferred SE language standard (See Prof. Lynch's discussion of Standard English) is associated with educated speakers of the language and, although there exist minor differences between the SE of different regions and countries, in most cases these are minor spelling or pronunciation variations which do not in any way interfere with comprehension of written material from one English speaking country to another. In all important respects, there does exist a universal English standard. The vast majority of English grammar and style rules encountered when taking English lessons are not in dispute. Those targeted by standard exams such as the SAT and others are deserving of study and close observance. Although breaking rules may well be an appropriate device to use from time to time for emphasis or effect and has certainly been done extensively for that purpose by many great literary figures, one must always consider what impression such infringements will give one's readers. In general, failure to break a rule rarely results in criticism or gives offense, while the commission of an infraction may. If one does not know one's audience well enough to rule out the possibility of a negative response, it is probably best not to risk provoking one. Some common grammar rules are questionable and indeed the arguments in favor of some commonly eschewed usages have been convincingly refuted. However, the audience-impression argument is still the ineluctable determinant of expressive suitability. If there is a likelihood that a split infinitive, a synesis error, or use of "none" as a plural noun may be perceived as an error (whether or not this

perception is nonsense), it is simply better to avoid the usage in question. An online English class that follows these principles is available.