

Demystifying Academic Writing

What is academic writing?

Academic writing (AW) is the general term for several distinct forms of professional writing practiced at the university level: essays, critical articles or reviews, and scientific reports are among the most popular. Like all forms of professional writing, AW has its distinct features. Perhaps the most well-known are (1) the presence of a thesis statement or hypothesis, (2) a fairly formal style, (3) rigorous argumentation, and (4) the use of citations—referring to other sources—to help justify and support the arguments.

No one grows up speaking or writing AW, so some of its features seem pretty strange when you are first encountering them. For example, it usually is not sufficient to give only your perspective about why a position is justified. Often, you have to support your position with other accepted forms of evidence with references to scholarship in the field, such as critical research studies or studies.

Understanding academic writing assignments

- Do not leave the assignment to the last minute ... and do read all the instructions carefully!
- Determine the typical **objectives** of writing assignments in your course or discipline.
- Pay close attention to **key words** that capture the objectives (such as “analyze”).
- Look for explanations of key words/objectives. Your instructor might describe what it means to “analyze” in this particular case.
- Look at model assignments if available.
- If you are still in doubt, ask your instructor or TA for clarification.

An overview of planning an academic position-based paper

About thesis statements ... Do not confuse a thesis with an opinion, which is a belief that has not been proven. An opinion by itself does not provide sufficient grounds for argumentation. A thesis is an assertion that can be backed with evidence.

Forming a thesis

You could start by writing down your opinion about a topic. This opinion can serve as a motivator for forming a thesis ... "I work so hard as a student, harder than I have ever had to work before. Being a student is really tough."

1. Then take your opinion and re-word it as a simple claim: "Post-secondary students work harder than any other demographic group today."
2. Now expand your simple claim into a thesis. You will likely find that your course readings or additional resource sources provide you with important information and insights to help you through this stage.

Thesis statements take various forms: X because Y; Although Z, X; or Even though Z, X because Y. Notice that the expanded claim, which is your thesis, includes at least one type of logical relationship.

For example-"Even though being a student is usually considered easier than working full-time, post-secondary students are the hardest-working demographic group in Canada today because they typically work part-time or even full-time while going to school"-acknowledges the opposing argument, puts forward the main claim, and forecasts how the claim will be proven (by comparing students to other demographic groups) (Behrens & Rosen, 2007, p.13). In fact, a solid thesis is like a mini-outline of your paper.

Organizing an academic position paper

1. Based on your thesis and the requirements of the assignment, choose relevant ideas from course readings or research sources. These serve as your evidence.
2. Make sure you acknowledge opposing or alternative ideas.
3. Create an outline for your paper. Note that for most thesis-based, argumentative essays
 - the introduction gives an overview of the topic or issue
 - the thesis is almost always the last sentence of your introduction
 - each main argument may have two or more important sub-points (which may include concessions and counter-arguments to opposing views)
 - the strongest argument or most important piece of evidence comes just before the conclusion
 - the conclusion reiterates (not just repeats) the thesis and suggests a sense of significance.

References

Behrens, L., & Rosen, L. (2007). *Writing and reading across the curriculum* (Canadian ed.). Toronto: Pearson Longman.

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