



HELLENIC REPUBLIC
UNIVERSITY OF CRETE

Academic English

Section 4: Complexity & Formality as Features of Academic Writing

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Introduction

- **Academic writing** in English is linear, which means it has one central point or theme with every part contributing to the main line of argument, without digressions or repetitions. Its objective is to inform rather than entertain. As well as this it is in the standard written form of the language. There are eight main features of academic writing that are often discussed. Academic writing is to some extent: **complex, formal,** objective, explicit, hedged, and responsible. It uses language precisely and accurately.

Formality

- Academic writing is relatively formal. In general this means that in an essay you should avoid:
 - colloquial words and expressions; "stuff", "a lot of", "thing", "sort of"
 - abbreviated forms: "can't", "doesn't", "shouldn't"
 - two word verbs: "put off", "bring up"
 - sub-headings, numbering and bullet-points in formal essays - but use them in reports
 - asking questions

Formality- Examples

Informal:

- With women especially, there is a lot of social pressure to conform to a certain physical shape.

Formal:

- With women especially, there is a great deal of social pressure to conform to a certain physical shape.

Informal:

- Significantly, even at this late date, Lautrec was considered a bit conservative by his peers.

Formal:

- Significantly, even at this late date, Lautrec was considered somewhat conservative by his peers.

Informal:

- Later Florey got together with Paul Fildes in an experimental study of the use of curare to relieve the intractable muscular spasms which occur in fully developed infection with tetanus or lockjaw.

Formal:

- Later Florey collaborated with Paul Fildes in an experimental study of the use of curare to relieve the intractable muscular spasms which occur in fully developed infection with tetanus or lockjaw.-

Informal:

- When a patient is admitted to a psychiatric inpatient unit, the clinical team should avoid the temptation to start specific treatments immediately.

Formal:

- When a patient is admitted to a psychiatric inpatient unit, the clinical team should avoid the temptation to commence specific treatments immediately.

Formality- Examples

Informal:

- The radical restructuring of British politics after 1931 doesn't lie in the events of 13-28 August, but in the changing attitudes within the National Government.

Formal:

- The radical restructuring of British politics after 1931 lies not in the events of 13-28 August, but in the changing attitudes within the National Government.

Informal:

- This isn't easy to do since most historians persist in speaking of *The National Government* as if the same sort of government ruled from 1931 to 1940.

Formal:

- This is not easy to do since most historians persist in speaking of *The National Government* as if the same sort of government ruled from 1931 to 1940.

Informal:

- A primary education system was set up throughout Ireland as early as 1831

Formal:

- 1. A primary education system was established throughout Ireland as early as 1831

Informal:

- This will cut down the amount of drug required and so the cost of treatment.

Formal:

- This will reduce the amount of drug required and so the cost of treatment.

Formality

- It is often the case that formal words are longer than informal words, formal words are single words not multi-words and formal words are of French/Latin origin rather than their informal equivalents which are of Anglo-Saxon origin. *i.e.: "depart" is from French/Latin but "go" is Anglo-Saxon.*

Helpful Table of a range of Formal/Informal words

Formal	Informal
appear	seem
ascend	climb
assist	help
cease	stop
commence	begin
consume	use
decrease	shorten
demonstrate	show
depart	go
depart	go

Helpful Table of a range of Formal/Informal words

enquire	ask
finish	end
inform	tell
obtain	get
preserve	keep
reject	say no
release	free
repair	mend
require	need
require	need

Helpful Table of a range of Formal/Informal words

reside	live
retain	keep
finally	in the end
immediately	at once
initially	at first
intermittently	on and off
principally	mainly
repeatedly	again and again
subsequently	next
therefore	so

Helpful Table of a range of Formal/Informal words

comprehension	understanding
deficiency	lack
opportunity	chance
perspiration	sweat
residence	house
vision	sight
amiable	friendly
complete	whole
energetic	lively
fortunate	lucky

Helpful Table of a range of Formal/Informal words

immature	childish
incorrect	wrong
inferior	worse
inexpensive	cheap
indistinct	dim
insane	mad
relaxed	laid back
responsible	in charge
sufficient	enough
superior	better
transparent	clear
vacant	empty

Levels of Formality

- The level of formality you write with should be determined by the expectations of your audience and your purpose.

*For example, if you are writing a cover letter for a job application or a college academic essay, you would write in a formal style. If you are writing a letter to a friend, writing something personal, or even writing something for a humorous or special interest magazine when informal writing is expected, you would use a more informal style. **Formality exists on a scale**—in the example below, a letter of application to a known colleague can result in a semi-formal style.*

Levels of Formality - Example

- **Formal (Written to an unknown audience):** I am applying for the receptionist position advertised in the local paper. I am an excellent candidate for the job because of my significant secretarial experience, good language skills, and sense of organization.
- **Semi-formal (Written to a well-known individual):** I am applying for the receptionist position that is currently open in the company. As you are aware, I have worked as a temporary employee with your company in this position before. As such, I not only have experience and knowledge of this position, but also already understand the company's needs and requirements for this job.
- **Informal (Incorrect):** Hi! I read in the paper that ya'll were looking for a receptionist. I think that I am good for that job because I've done stuff like it in the past, am good with words, and am incredibly well organized.

Levels of Formality - Exercises

These texts differ in formality. One of the reasons for this difference is the different audiences they are targeting. Read the texts below carefully and then rank them from most formal (1), to most informal (4).

- A. Why write essays? In the modern world our thinking is largely transmitted by speech and through radio and television. At the university, however, you are required to do much of your thinking through writing. In the Humanities and Social Sciences you are inevitably required to produce a considerable number of essays.
- B. It might be said that in-vitro fertilization, at any age, is a matter of free choice, especially if the patient pays. If a woman wants the procedure, age should be irrelevant. But age can never be totally irrelevant. The line is unclear. But in the case of older mothers, questions of the "best interest of the child" press more insistently. And even when the patient pays something towards the cost of these procedures, there is some cost to the public. The issue of resource allocation remains.

Levels of Formality - Exercises

- C. In many radiotherapy centres where planning for external beam treatments is performed by radiation therapists, the treatment sheet and its calculations are independently checked by staff from a different educational background, typically a radiotherapy physicist. The benefits of this practice were evaluated in a radiotherapy department with two linear accelerators: one combined superficial-orthovoltage unit and one telecaesium unit.
- D. It's a real shame that something as simple as a diet was not taken account of by nurses, thus causing unnecessary pain to the patient. It probably caused even more pain to the patient's family and friends having to see their loved one die like that. How would we feel if we saw our own relative go through that experience?
- E. A major challenge in the national water plan is to determine the trade-offs between the costs of action (such as infrastructure improvements) designed to overcome water problems (such as too much water seepage and evaporation) with the public benefits (such as larger water flows downstream) of such actions.

Source: <http://staff.uny.ac.id/sites/default/files/lain-lain/titik-sudartinah-ss-ma/ACADEMIC%20WRITING%20EXERCISE.pdf>

Complexity - Introduction

- Written language is relatively more complex than spoken language (Biber, 1988; Biber, Johansson, Leech, Conrad & Finegan, 1999; Chafe, 1982; Cook, 1997; Halliday, 1989).
- Written texts are lexically dense compared to spoken language - they have proportionately more lexical words than grammatical words. Written texts are shorter and have longer, more complex words and phrases. They have more noun-based phrases, more nominalizations, and more lexical variation.
- Written language is grammatically more complex than spoken language. It has more subordinate clauses, more "that/to" complement clauses, more long sequences of prepositional phrases, more attributive adjectives and more passives than spoken language.
- **The following features are common in academic written texts:**
Noun-based phrases, Subordinate clauses/embedding, Complement clauses, Sequences of prepositional phrases, Participles, Passive verbs, Lexical density, Lexical complexity, Nominalization, Attributive adjectives, Adjectival groups as complements

Complexity - Examples

Halliday (1989, p.79) compares a sentence from a spoken text:

You can control the trains this way and if you do that you can be quite sure that they'll be able to run more safely and more quickly than they would otherwise, no matter how bad the weather gets.

with a typical written variant:

The use of this method of control unquestionably leads to safer and faster train running in the most adverse weather conditions.

The main difference is the grammar, not the vocabulary.

Complexity - Nominal groups

- Formal written English uses nouns and nominal group (noun-based phrases) more than verbs.

One simple example is:

Like all other forms of life, we human beings are the product of evolution.

Like all other forms of life, we human beings are the product of how we have evolved.

The noun "evolution" is preferred to the verb "evolve" and the "wh" clause.

Structure of nominal groups

- Written English is lexically dense - there is a higher proportion of content words per clause. This can be done by modification of nouns to form nominal groups. A typical nominal group is structured in the following way:

determiner	premodifier	head	postmodifier
a	complicated	solution	to the problem

- Nominal groups can function as subjects, complements or objects of prepositions:

i.e.: *A more detailed life of Lord Reading, Liberal leader in the House of Lords and an important actor in the events of 1931, would be of great value.*

- A nominal group can also be qualified by another nominal group in apposition.

i.e.: *Dr. Maurice Aumont, the Director of the Berlitz School at Bordeaux, looked after him in an efficient and kindly way.*

Complexity

Subordinate clauses/embedding

- *There are several factors which help to prolong this period to perhaps three or four times that in the male.*
- *The other way in which the economic aspects of military expenditure were presented was in the form of the public expenditure costs.*
- *The family establishes a variety of bases for refuges which seem to be used at different times of the year.*

Complement clauses

- that-clauses:

This conforms conveniently with Maslow's (1970) claim that human motivation is related to a hierarchy of human needs.

It follows that if the Labour Government is to secure acceptance of its economic package, it has to secure the support of MPs from either the Liberal or the Conservative party.

- to-clauses:

Britain's apparent ability to rally Commonwealth support at Chicago seemed to the Americans to be evidence of Britain's continued world power.

- of+ing-clauses:

The possibility of increasing dollar receipts was coupled with a belief that Africa could be a strategic centre for British power.

Sequences of prepositional phrases

- Sequences of prepositional phrases are common in academic English. A prepositional phrase is a preposition followed by a nominal group.

Examples are:

This article analyses the constitutional aspects behind the formation of the first and second National Governments, examining in particular the role of the king in the formation of the two governments.

The information very properly reached the files of the survey for antimalarial compounds under the Survey Number SN-183.

Many of the suggested benefits of group living have been concerned with avoiding being eaten by predators.

Participles

- Formal written English uses verbs less than spoken English.
-ed and -ing participles allow verbs to be used nominally or adjectively.

Examples:

- *Similar temptations overcame philosophers concerned with establishing a secure base for individual responsibility.*
- *The Egyptians regarded time as a succession of recurring phases.*
- *Doubts as to the proper division of property at death, as well as rights between partners living together, were resolved by having legal rules prescribing a formula.*
- *It was only to be tolerated in a controlled and formalized context.*
- *A frequent change found in proper names is syllable loss.*

Passive verbs

- In spoken English we often use a subject such as "people", "somebody", "they", "we", or "you" even when we do not know who the agent is.
- In formal English, particularly writing, we often prefer to use a passive.

Compare:

- *They're installing the new computer system next month.*
- *The new computer system is being installed next month. (more formal)*

Lexical density

- Written English generally has a much denser pattern of words, it is more lexically dense. If we define lexical density as the number of content words in a clause, then written English has a higher lexical density than spoken English (Halliday, 1996, p. 347).

For example, the written text:

- *Obviously the government is frightened of union reaction to its move to impose proper behavior on unions.*

is more lexically dense than the spoken version:

- *Obviously the government is frightened how the unions will react if it tries to make them behave properly.*

Lexical complexity

- Adding affixes to existing words (the base) to form new words is common in academic English. Prefixes are added to the front of the base (*like dislike*), whereas suffixes are added to the end of the base (*active activate*). Prefixes usually do not change the class of the base word, but suffixes usually do change the class of the word.
- The most common prefixes used to form new verbs in academic English are: *re-*, *dis-*, *over-*, *un-*, *mis-*, *out-*. The most common suffixes are: *-ise*, *-en*, *-ate*, *-(i)fy*. By far the most common affix in academic English is *-ise*.

e.g. verbs + prefix verb

- The most common prefixes used to form new nouns in academic English are: *co-* and *sub-*. The most common suffixes are: *-tion*, *-ity*, *-er*, *-ness*, *-ism*, *-ment*, *-ant*, *-ship*, *-age*, *-ery*. By far the most common noun affix in academic English is *-tion*.

e.g. noun + prefix noun

- Many adjectives are formed from a base of a different class with a suffix (e.g. *-less*, *-ous*). Adjectives can also be formed from other adjectives, especially by the negative prefixes (*un-*, *in-* and *non-*).
- The most common suffixes are *-al*, *-ent*, *-ive*, *-ous*, *-ful*, *-less*.

e.g. Suffix added to verbs or nouns adjective

Lexical complexity - Examples

Prefix	Meaning	Examples
<i>re-</i>	again or back	restructure, revisit, reappear, rebuild, refinance
<i>dis-</i>	reverses the meaning of the verb	disappear, disallow, disarm, disconnect, discontinue
<i>over-</i>	too much	overbook, oversleep, overwork
<i>un-</i>	reverses the meaning of the verb	unbend, uncouple, unfasten
<i>anti-</i>	against	anticlimax, antidote, antithesis
<i>auto-</i>	self	autobiography, automobile
<i>bi-</i>	two	bilingualism, biculturalism, bi-metalism
<i>co-</i>	joint	co-founder, co-owner, co-descendant

Lexical complexity - Examples

Suffix	Meaning	Examples
<i>-tion</i>	action/instance of V-ing	alteration, demonstration
<i>-ity</i>	state or quality of being A	ability, similarity, responsibility
<i>-er</i>	person who V-s something used for V-ing person concerned with N	advertiser, driver computer, silencer astronomer, geographer
<i>-ness</i>	state or quality of being A	darkness, preparedness, consciousness
<i>-ism</i>	doctrine of N	Marxism, Maoism, Thatcherism
<i>-ment</i>	action/instance of V-ing	development, punishment, unemployment

Nominalization

- Formal written English uses nouns more than verbs. For example, "judgement" rather than "judge", "development" rather than "develop", "admiration" rather than "admire". **Changing a verb or other word into a noun is called nominalization.**

Instead of:

- *This information enables us to formulate precise questions.*

we would write:

- *This information enables the formulation of precise questions.*

More examples are:

- *There appeared to be evidence of differential treatment of children. This is reflected in our admiration for people who have made something of their lives, sometimes against great odds, and in our somewhat disappointed judgment of those who merely drift through life.*
- *All airfields in the country would be nationalized, and the government would continue with the development of new aircraft as recommended by the Brabazon Committee.*

Nominalization

Read the following text:

Reproduction with variation is a major characteristic of life. Without reproduction, life would quickly come to an end. The earliest single-celled organisms reproduced by duplicating their genetic material and then dividing in two. The two resulting daughter cells were identical to each other and to the parent cell, except for mutations that occurred during the process of gene duplication. Such errors, although rare, provided the raw material for biological evolution. The combination of reproduction and errors in the duplication of genetic material results in biological evolution, a change in the genetic composition of a population of organisms over time.

(W. K. Purves, D. Sadava, G. H. Orians & H. C. Heller, Life: The science of biology, W. H. Freeman, 2004)

and compare it to:

All organisms reproduce and sometimes when they reproduce, the children vary. This is an important characteristic of life. If organisms did not reproduce, life would quickly come to an end. How did the earliest single-celled organisms reproduce? They duplicated their genetic material and then they divided in two. Two daughter cells resulted from this process; they were identical to each other and to the parent cell. But sometimes as the genes duplicated, they changed or mutated. These errors are not very common but they provide the basic material for life to evolve. So when the genetic material duplicates, they reproduce and they make errors. As a result, there is a change in what the genes are composed of. When these processes combine, life evolves.

The first text is more academic. The second text is longer. It has shorter sentences. It asks questions and answers them. All these features are typical of spoken language.

Nominalisation

- Nominalised words end in “tion” (reproduction, identification), *-ity* (ability, similarity, complexity), *-ness* (blindness, darkness, preparedness), *-ment* (development, encouragement), *-ship* (friendship), *-age* (mileage), *-ery* (robbery, bribery), *-al* (arrival), *-ance* (assistance, resemblance).
- There are also other ways to nominalise:
 - Some verbs are also used as nouns: plan, increase, influence, survey.
 - Some involve a slight change: sell → sale, choose → choice.
 - You can use the “-ing” form of the verb: selling, developing.
 - Furthermore, you can make nominalizations from adjectives by adding *-ness*, *-ism*, or *-ity*.

Attributive adjectives

- Adjectives can be used either attributively (e.g. the *big* house) or predicatively/as complements (e.g. the house is *big*). Attributive adjectives are common in academic English, as are complex adjectival groups used as complements.

An example of adjectives used attributively is:

With economic specialization and the development of external economic linkages, division of labor intensifies, a merchant class is added to the political elite, and selective migration streams add to the social and ethnic complexities of cities.

Adjectival groups as complements

- Complex adjectival groups used as complements are common in academic writing, as are attributive clauses.

Examples of adjectival groups used as complements are:

- It is **necessary**.
- Nicolson's account is far too **discreet**.
- The same is **true** of the various biographies of Lloyd George.
- It is **impossible** to understand what followed.
- The outcome of a correct response is reliably **different** for the two trial types.
- The evolution of associations of mutual benefit is theoretically **easy** to imagine.
- The development of arms and legs is very **important** in its own right.

Adjectival groups as complements

Premodifier	Head	Postmodifier	Complement
	necessary		that he comprehend the events of 1931
far too	discreet	indeed	
	true		of the various biographies of Lloyd George
	impossible		to understand what followed.
reliably	different		for the two trial types
theoretically	easy	for anyone	to imagine
very	important	in its own right	

Suggested Sources for Practice

- <http://www.uefap.com/writing/writfram.htm>
- <https://learning.wintec.ac.nz/mod/resource/view.php?id=71687>
- <http://moodle.citylit.ac.uk/mod/book/view.php?id=90550>

Sources

- <http://www.uefap.com/>
- <https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/608/02/>
- <http://staff.uny.ac.id/sites/default/files/lain-lain/titik-sudartinah-ss-ma/ACADEMIC%20WRITING%20EXERCISE.pdf>

End of Section



Με τη συγχρηματοδότηση της Ελλάδας και της Ευρωπαϊκής Ένωσης

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