Writing *academically* means writing in a certain style, for a certain purpose, and to a certain audience. The style is formal, the purpose is to persuade and/or to inform, and the audience is your lecturer and the wider community of researchers, including fellow students. While there are no rules for writing academically, there are many conventions. This guide covers a few of those.

### 4 Qualities of Academic Writing

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>clear</th>
<th>Academic writing features formal language, but it expresses ideas as simply as possible. Remember, academic writing is not for entertainment; it is a way of communicating ideas. The ideas may be complicated and therefore the communication should be as easy to understand as possible.</th>
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<tr>
<td>specific</td>
<td>Avoid vague language and generalizations. Where possible, be specific about numbers, places and people. Note that, in general, it is better to talk in detail about a limited topic than it is to talk superficially about a wide range of things.</td>
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<tr>
<td>supported</td>
<td>You should only write that which you can support. If you cannot find or think of examples or evidence to corroborate your position, do not write it down. Academic audiences demand information that can be validated and verified, so academic writers are very picky about what they use to support their ideas.</td>
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<tr>
<td>focused</td>
<td>Academic texts address a certain question or problem. Certain parts of academic texts then focus on smaller parts of the issue at hand. The basic unit of an academic text is a paragraph – each paragraph must be focused on one idea about one sub topic. Focus in a paragraph comes from cohesion and unity.</td>
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### The Paragraph

- **One main point or argument** = One paragraph (if you want to introduce a new point or new argument, start a new paragraph)
- **First (Topic) sentence** = Statement of your main point or argument
- **Following sentences** = More information and examples about the main point or proof of the validity of your argument

In academic writing, one paragraph constitutes the presentation of one main point or argument. A paragraph contains a main point and further information and examples relating to that main point, or a claim and proof of the legitimacy of that claim. Typically, paragraphs contain two parts: the topic sentence and support.

The topic sentence states what you are talking about (the topic) and what you want to say about it (claim).
Some examples:

- All apples (topic) have pips (claim)
- Studying at university (topic) is very difficult (claim)
- Writing reports (topic) is the best way to improve your English (claim).
- The Blue Whale (topic) is the largest animal that has ever existed (claim)
- The theory of general relativity (topic) is a metric theory of gravitation (claim).

Support can be made up of a variety of different things depending on what sort of claim you are making. If you are describing a theory, the support would consist of further exposition. If you are making a claim about the truthfulness or falsehood of something, it would consist of proof.

Some types of support are:

- Facts
- Statistics
- Theory
- Logic
- Paraphrase
- Direct quotation
- Explanation
- Can you think of any more?

The support should convince the reader that the claim made in the topic sentence is accurate. Also, bear in mind the relevance of the support. Be careful if you use a lot of internet sources as there are generally not good control measures in place on the Web. The source you find on the Web could have been written by anyone, not necessarily a respected academic.

Journals usually provide the most up-to-date forms of support and, in general, the most recent information is the best. Be careful about using books or journals that are more than ten years old. Unless they are seminal (very significant) works, the chances are that something more relevant has been written between then and now.

Sample Paragraphs

A Well Written Paragraph

The UK government should institute minimum sentences for certain violent crimes. The government must do what it can to deter potential criminals from committing violent crimes as research shows that these crimes above all contribute to wider problems in society (Smith 2007, Wolf 2005, Haines 2003). Instituting minimum sentences for violent crimes will have a deterrent effect on future commissions of those crimes (Jones 1999) as potential criminal can be assured that a custodial sentence will follow. In a pilot study of these methods in Cardiff in 2004, violent crime was reduced by 25% (Wolf 2004). Therefore, minimum sentences are recommended in these cases.

Commentary: This paragraph has a clear topic sentence which immediately tells the reader what position is being argued. The subsequent information is directly relevant and supports the argument.

A Poorly Written Paragraph

Jones (1999) argues that instituting minimum sentences for violent crimes have a deterrent effect on future commissions of those crimes as potential criminal can be assured that a custodial sentence will follow. Jails in the UK are overcrowded so new jails will have to be built. Prison ships, such as those last seen during the Napoleonic war are a possible alternative (Kendal, 1997). The government has a responsibility to protect its citizens from crime. Crime levels are on the increase and this causes wider problems in society (Smith 2007, Wolf 2005, Haines 2003).

Commentary: This paragraph leaves the reader wondering what the point actually is. Although the ideas are loosely connected, it is unclear whether the author advocates minimum sentences, the construction of more prisons, or the reintroduction of prison ships. There appears to be more than one argument, and none of those arguments is adequately supported.