Chapter 3: The Conventions of Academic Writing

Chapter Overview

This chapter defines conventions as a set of expectations which, unlike rules, can be altered slightly. It is important to meet the expectations which guide academic reading and writing, particularly in terms of how information will be presented and organized. While all academic writing is committed to truthful inquiry, approaches to defining and sharing knowledge differ across disciplines and so, therefore, do styles of writing. This is true of the length and structure of academic papers, uses of primary and secondary sources, citation styles, and specialized language. What writing in the sciences, humanities, and social sciences has in common is a commitment to clarity and objectivity. The chapter concludes with strategies for reading academic writing.

Key Concepts

conventions	The patterns, structures, and practices that people use to communicate effectively with one another. Conventions embody the expectations the writer and reader have about a text.
sciences	The branch of knowledge and academic discipline that studies natural phenomena to determine their behaviour and properties.
empirical methods	A means for gathering knowledge through direct and indirect observation, experimentation, or experience.
humanities	The branch of knowledge and academic discipline that studies the tools human beings use to express themselves and to represent their experiences.
primary sources	The original material of a field of study. These sources vary, depending upon the discipline, but the data they provide was made or gathered by someone who had a first-hand connection with the topic.
social sciences	The branch of knowledge and academic discipline that studies human behaviour within a defined order or system to offer insight into the ways individuals and groups behave, respond to change, and make decisions.
faculties	In colleges and universities, administrative groupings of departments in the same discipline.

structure	The grammatical and rhetorical framework of writing from sentences, to paragraphs, to sections of texts, to the complete text.
sources	Material supplying evidence or information in research.
citation styles	The guidelines for documenting citations according to different discipline-specific style manuals for academic writers and researchers.
scientific (or objective) method	In scientific and social scientific writing, particularly when reporting on research, a structure using subtitles for each step; often call the IMRaD structure (Introduction, Methods, Results, and Discussion).
IMRaD	In scientific and social scientific writing, particularly when reporting on research, a structure using subtitles for each step (short for *Introduction, Methods, Results, and Discussion*).
literature review	A survey of the scholarly conversation on the topic of a text often included in introductions of academic articles.
secondary sources	Academic publications that analyze primary sources. They also engage with and analyze other secondary sources, situating the writer's analysis in the scholarly conversation.
analysis	The use of critical thinking to break down a text in order to show something about it to a reader; one of the key academic acts practiced by all researchers.
synthesis	Combining critical thinking with the exploration and use of sources, summarized and analyzed in order to reach a conclusion on a topic; one of the key academic acts practiced by all researchers.
summary	A text in a writer's own words that represents the ideas of another writer's text in a condensed form; one of the key academic acts practiced by all researchers.
evidence	The material derived from primary and secondary sources necessary for creating new ideas, solving problems, or proving new claims through academic writing.
inductive reasoning	In simple terms, the act of drawing a conclusion from evidence.

deductive reasoning	In simple terms, a reasoning process which depends on the validity of a claim or a general statement.
jargon	The discipline-specific short-hand terms for common concepts in a subject.
clause	A group of words that includes a subject and a predicate. Some clauses (such as independent clauses) can stand alone as complete sentences, while others (such as dependent clauses) require more information to make sense.
redundancy	The quality of writing that is superfluous or repetitious, which adds no new information to what the writer has already given.
wordiness	In writing, where excess words do not contribute to meaning, drawing out a passage so that the emphasis is lost or not where it should be.
tone	What the reader perceives about the writer's attitude towards a subject through their writing.

Discussion Topics

1. Have you ever been caught off guard when the assessments in one class were considerably different from those in classes of another discipline (for example, a biology class when all previous classes had been in history)? How did you deal with these different expectations? How might you act if you encounter this situation again in future?

2. What is your experience of reading texts that are "difficult"? Are they hard to read because they assume knowledge that some readers do not have, or because they are written using unfamiliar language and complex syntax? What do you do when you are required to read something that is challenging?

Assignments or Activities

1. Review the web pages of three departments from different disciplines at your college or university (for example, psychology, chemistry, and history). What information and images do each department use to present itself? Can you begin to detect different strategies for pursuing and representing knowledge?

2. In groups of three, discuss which courses you have taken or plan to take, and what your purposes are for studying at your college or university. How many disciplines are represented by your combined studies? Do you feel drawn to specialize in a

particular area? What are the different styles of researching and writing that will be required of you in each discipline?

3. See the list of **Further Resources** below. Compare the article by Zadrozny (humanities) to the one by Vasconcelos and Hall (social sciences). To do this, read the introductory paragraph or section closely and scan the rest of the article, paying attention to headings or topic sentences of paragraphs to get a sense of how the article is organized.
    a. Is it possible to detect the purpose and argument of the article from its introduction?
    b. How are primary sources presented? Is this done mainly via quotation, or through the use of visual images such as tables and graphs?
    c. At what stage do secondary sources appear (you may be alerted to their presence by citation)? Are these sources clustered together, or does some summary and discussion follow each one?
    d. As you read, keep a list of unfamiliar vocabulary that might be terminology associated with the journal's discipline. Are these terms defined in the article, or do the authors assume that readers will already know them?

4. Read the fourth paragraph from "The Case for Semicolons" by Lauren Oyler, in the Readings section at the end of the book (the paragraph starting with "For those who don't know the rules—and I don't blame you!—a semicolon does what it says on the box …"). Underline any words, phrases, or punctuation that would not appear in academic writing. Why are they suitable in Oyler's article, published in the *New York Times,* but not in a scholarly article?

Further Resources

Vasconcelos, Isamara M. and Peter V. Hall, "Ride-Hailing Applications in Vancouver, Canada: Representation, Local Empowerment and Resistance." *Canadian Journal of Urban Research,* vol. 30, no. 1, Summer 2021, pp. 53-66.

A peer-reviewed article which examines that political, economic, and regulatory strategies that led to delayed adoption of ride-hailing apps in Vancouver, British Columbia. Cited in APA style.

Zadrozny, Sara. "Of Cosmetic Value Only: Make-Up and Terrible Old Ladies in Victorian Literature." *19: Interdisciplinary Studies in the Long Nineteenth Century,* vol. 32, 14 June 2021.

A peer-reviewed article on changing attitudes towards the use of cosmetics by aging women in nineteenth-century novels. Cited in Modern Humanities Research Association (MHRA) style.