Research Methodology

Level : Master II

Speciality : literature and civilization

**LESSON ONE: ACADEMIC STYLE**

**Academic style** is the style of writing by students and professionals in academic disciplines, e.g. engineering, science, architecture, philosophy, fine arts and law. Many of these disciplines have their own distinctive style. For example, the kind of writing you find in engineering or philosophy is very different from what you will find in fine arts or law.

One distinguishing feature of all types of academic writing, however, is **technicality**, i.e. the use of terms with specific meanings in each subject. The second aspect of ‘style’ is that **written** styles of English tend to be very different from **spoken** styles. Written styles tend to be **formal** whereas spoken styles are more casual.  
Written texts used in most academic contexts need to be:

Formal and technical to sound authoritative

Impersonal to sound objective

1. **Academic writing is evidence-based**

Perhaps the most important distinguishing feature of written academic style is that it is evidence-based. Writers support their arguments and claims with evidence from the body of knowledge relevant to their discipline. Furthermore, any research that is undertaken must make reference to previous work in the field. As a result, academic texts are rich in attributions to other writers and references to previous research, as seen in the examples below:

• *Previous studies have shown that ...*

• *These sources suggest that from the fifth century onwards ....*

• *According to the 1957 Annual Medical Report, the death of the 960 inhabitants of ...*

1. **Academic writing contains many words of classical origin**

Unlike everyday English, academic writing is characterised by a high frequency of words of classical origin (Greek and Latin). The main reason for this is that Latin was the *lingua academica* during the European renaissance; in other words, it was the international language of scholars. Even up until relatively recently, great works of science, such as Isaac Newton’s *Philosophiæ Naturalis Principia Mathematica* (1687), were written in Latin. Where academic texts were written in English, words of classical origin were used for concepts and phenomena for which there was no equivalent in English.

Although the *lingua academica* of today is English, writers of academic English still tend to use words which are derived from Latin, and also, mainly through Latin texts, from Greek

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Everyday words** | **Academic words** |
| a lot of  big  bring together  get rid of  not enough  story thing trouble way (of doing)  worry | considerable significant synthesise eradicate insufficient anecdote object difficulty  method  concern |

1. **Academic writing tends to be cautious**

Academic writers are careful about the claims they make: they take care not to appear certain where some doubt may exist, and they are careful not to over-generalise. An example of this kind of transformation can be seen below. The second sentence is in academic style:

• *Drinking alcohol causes breast cancer. → Some studies suggest that drinking alcohol may increase the risk of breast cancer.*

1. **Academic writing is normally impersonal**

In the interests of objectivity, academic writers tend to remove themselves from the writing. The focus is on ‘what’ happened, ‘how’ it was done, and ‘what’ was found. The ‘who’ (the writer) is not normally given very much attention. This is one of the reasons why personal pronouns (‘I’ and ‘we’) tend not to be used. In addition, academic texts rarely address the reader directly and the pronoun normally used for this, ‘you’, is avoided. The second sentence is in academic style:

• *You could say that Churchill made some catastrophic decisions early in the War. →* *It can be said that Churchill made some catastrophic decisions early in the War.*

There are some exceptions: in certain disciplines, it may be appropriate for a writer to explain their personal interest in the research area. In some disciplines, the researcher may participate in the research as a participant-observer. In these cases, ‘I’ will be used. The example below, which illustrates the former situation, is taken from a dissertation in History.

*I became interested in X after reading …… I hope to convey some of my fascination for the  
subject, as well as expressing my admiration of the artistic achievements of those involved.*

1. **Academic writing avoids contracted forms**

Contracted forms (e.g. *it’s, don’t, isn’t, aren’t*) should not be used in academic writing. The only exception would be if you are transcribing a recorded conversation or interview.

1. **Academic writing uses nominalisation**

There is a tendency for academic writers to transform verbs (actions) into nouns. In the example below, the verb ‘opened’ becomes the noun ‘opening’.

• *The Liverpool and Manchester railway opened in 1830. This brought increased prosperity to both cities.*• *The opening of the Liverpool and Manchester railway in 1830 brought increased prosperity to both cities.*

As a result of this kind of transformation, academic writing is characterised by long noun phrase constructions, as in: ‘The opening of the Liverpool and Manchester railway in 1830’. In certain cases, these nominalised forms can become very long and complex:

• *the effect of reducing aggressiveness by producing an ACTH-mediated condition of decreased  
androgen levels.*

Although this kind of construction is considered normal in scientific writing, unless the reader is familiar with the constructions, it does make reading difficult as there are so many pieces of information to process in the one sentence. There is an argument that too much nominalisation should be discouraged.

1. **Academic writing avoids rhetorical questions**

Questions to introduce significant new ideas are avoided, and are replaced with statements:

• *Is the welfare system good or not? →* *It is important to consider the effectiveness of the British welfare system.* However, setting out a list of research questions in the introductory section of a research report is  
quite common.

1. **Academic writing is precise and detailed**

Last of all, one of the most noticeable features of academic writing is that it is very precise and detailed. This relates to the setting out and development of the thinking and the ideas, as well as to the language used in the writing.