American-Style Research Papers

Americans in the academy use a particular style of writing for their academic writing. Academic writing style varies somewhat between disciplines: you would write a paper on Shakespeare in a very different way than you would write a paper on how different chemicals interact. Nevertheless, there are some features that most academic writing share.

Vocabulary and Your Audience
First rule: understand to whom you are writing. If you are writing for a scholarly journal, you should be able to use vocabulary that a non-expert reader might not immediately understand. However, if you are writing for a more general audience, you should explain terms when they are introduced.

In many classes, you will be writing to an expert audience. However, you should always check the assignment sheet and ask your teacher about the audience if that is not clear.

*Expert Audience:* Ford’s poetry explores diaspora through poems that interject disruptive *vers libre* into established forms.

*General Audience:* Ford’s poetry explores the internal conflict felt by someone displaced from their “home” culture by writing poems in forms like sonnets and ballads, but also breaking those forms in intentional and surprising ways.

Even if you are writing to an expert audience, a general audience should still be able to follow the writing. They may not understand all the words, but they should still be able to read it.

Original Contributions
Highlight your contributions to the academic conversations surrounding your topic. Whether that is synthesizing other studies and ideas or making a new argument, you will need to include your opinion. Your opinion needs to be supported by research. If there is research that supports an opposite claim, you should have insights into why your claim is stronger.

Original contributions to the conversation are important because each published paper in the American academy is, theoretically, supposed to push that conversation forward. Therefore, you should state your insights confidently, but with support.

*Example:* Logan et al. suggest that teaching in a technological, post-industrial world requires rethinking (2010). I agree with them: I believe schools and states need to rethink how they educate students.

This cites only one source, does not explain that source, hedges the writer’s opinions, and does not add to the source’s ideas. It needs some revising.
Example: Logan et al. (2010) compiled analyses of various alternative grade schools in the United States, and discovered generally higher learning outcomes. Although, as Kartik (2012) points out in a similar study, the differences could be due to any number of socio-economic variables, it is worth considering the possible effects of making changes to public school education to match the kind of experiences students at alternative schools can have.

This is much improved. The writer’s contribution is clear, and the sources are well integrated into the writer’s argument.

**Giving Credit for Words and Ideas**
No matter what the piece of writing is, it is very important to Americans to give others credit for their words and ideas. How you do this will be up to the style guide that you use. Avoid plagiarism by citing any idea that you get from someone else and putting quotation marks around any language that you borrow.

Not only does that make things easier for your reader if your reader wants to follow up on your research, it also lends credibility to your writing. It shows that you have done your research, and it enables you to put your ideas in conversation with the ideas of other people working in the field. This concept of contributing to a conversation is central to American academic writing.

**The Right Tone**
Even when you are writing to an expert audience, keep your writing clear and concise. Lay out clear transitions between ideas and draw connections for your readers. Never assume that your readers will draw a connection for themselves. In American academic writing, it is your responsibility to ensure that you communicate to your readers, not your readers’ responsibility to understand.

Most of the time, you will need to use a formal tone. Avoid contractions, slang, idioms, and rhetorical questions. You should also avoid the second person. This handout is not written in a formal tone.

*Informal:* But if actions speak louder than words, don’t you think we need to intervene?
*Formal:* This organization must take actions that reflect its promises and intervene in the situation.

While you want to be careful to spell things out for your reader, you want to avoid unnecessary information. Don’t write sentences that have no information for the reader. Make your sentences easy to understand: avoid long, convoluted sentences and flowery language.

Reserve a round of editing for tone. Look for ways to simplify your sentences. Ideally, your writing will get straight to the point and remain there.
Americans also expect an objective tone. Yes, you will sometimes place your argument in opposition to someone else’s argument. You have an opinion to express or an argument to make, and you are supposed to argue for it. Nevertheless, you must argue for it in a way that shows respect for the work of others in the field.

Contact
Want to work on the style, tone, argument, or language of your paper? Come work with a tutor at the Writing Center! Drop by or use the information below to contact us and set up an appointment.

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