

# Structure and Formatting in Academic Writing

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## Abstract

This essay outlines the basics of structure and formatting in academic writing. There is no single, fixed academic style. Every teacher and academic journal will have slightly different requirements. But, the essay identifies the key points in any English academic writing, and concludes by saying that attractive and consistent formatting are essential for making a good first impression on the readers of your academic essay.

Keywords: Academic writing, structure, formatting, word processing, romanization

## Introduction

There is a saying in English: “First impressions count”. When people are reading your academic essay, the first thing that they will notice is the appearance. If your essay looks badly organized and untidy, it is very difficult to convince the reader that the content is of high quality.

More importantly, a key aspect of academic writing is following strict formatting guidelines. If you look at the “Instructions for Authors” in any academic journal, there will be a long list of instructions covering everything from the length (word count)<sup>2</sup> to whether you should write 13 December or December 13.

In this essay we will look at the basics of structure and formatting in academic writing. All teachers at university and academic journals have their own guidelines. This essay cannot give you all the variations. It aims to cover the most general points. Please think of it both as an explanation and a model for your own academic writing. It will cover overall structure, sections, paragraphs, fonts, spacing, and writing Japanese words in English essays.

## Overall Structure

An academic essay follows a reasonably set pattern.

- Title: The title should be as direct as possible and clearly state the content of your essay. These days, most academics find useful articles using keyword searches in search engines like Google Scholar. If your title does not contain important keywords, far fewer people will find and read your essay.

- Abstract: A short summary of your essay.
- List of keywords: Helps other researchers in your field to find your article using internet and library search engines.
- Introduction: Outlines the structure of your essay and explains the aims.
- Main body: The main argument of your essay and supporting evidence, divided into a number of sections.
- Conclusions: A summary of how your essay has contributed to furthering understanding of the topic.
- Notes: Any additional information which does not need to be included in the main body of the text.<sup>3</sup>
- Bibliography: A list of all the sources used in your essay.

## Sections

After the introduction, you enter the main body of your essay. If you divide the main body into sections it makes the structure clearer to the reader. It also helps you, the writer, to organize what you want to say. Each section should have a title. You can make the title stand out from the rest of the text by underlining it, or using bold letters.

In the first video in the English II online Academic Writing series, six components of academic writing were introduced: aims, literature review, hypothesis, methodology, evidence and discussion (Seaton 2009). These could be the sections of your essay. Alternatively, you could have very different section titles, such as in this essay where they are Introduction, Overall Structure, Sections, and so on. It all depends on the type of essay you are writing.

## Paragraphs

Within sections you should divide your writing into many paragraphs. A paragraph is a group of sentences that has a unified point or theme. There is no limit on the length of a paragraph. It can be one sentence or fifty. However, very long paragraphs are often a sign of bad organization, or long-winded prose. Try to keep your paragraphs short and focused. Note how in this essay most paragraphs are between four and eight lines long. Paragraphs of more than fifteen lines should be avoided if possible.

There are two main ways to format paragraphs on a word processor. The first way is to indent at the beginning of each paragraph and have no spaces between paragraphs (as in this essay). The second way is not to indent but to have a space between the paragraphs. Look at these two examples.

### Example 1

This is the first paragraph. This is the first paragraph. This is the first paragraph.  
This is the first paragraph. This is the first paragraph. This is the first paragraph.  
This is the second paragraph. This is the second paragraph. This is the second  
paragraph. This is the second paragraph. This is the second paragraph.

### Example 2

This is the first paragraph. This is the first paragraph. This is the first paragraph. This is the  
first paragraph. This is the first paragraph. This is the first paragraph.  
This is the second paragraph. This is the second paragraph. This is the second paragraph.  
This is the second paragraph. This is the second paragraph.

## Fonts

If you are writing in English, make sure that you use an English font. Good fonts to use include Times New Roman, Century, Helvetica or Garamond. Try to avoid fonts which contain an element of design, such as the handwriting fonts. Such fonts are good for pamphlets and other visual materials, but can make a long academic essay tiring to read. Also, do not make the characters too small or large. A 12-point font is the best to use for the main body of text in your essays.

One common mistake made by Japanese university students is to use the alphabet in a Japanese font. If you do this in full character mode (*zengaku*) you can have many problems with word wraps at the end of lines. English word processors automatically start a new line with a new word. If you use a Japanese font, you lose this function. Look at the example below of this problem.

### Example 3

This is a paragraph without word wraps. This is a paragraph without word wraps.  
This is a paragraph without word wraps. This is a paragraph without word wraps.  
This is a paragraph without word wraps.

## Spacing

If you are submitting a first draft of an essay to your teacher, he or she may want to write comments. To give your teacher space to write comments, do the following two things. First, have wide margins, at least 3 centimetres at the top, bottom, left and right. Second, use 1.5 or double spacing for the main text. Look at the examples.

#### Example 4

An example of single spacing. An example of single spacing. An example of single spacing. An example of single spacing. An example of single spacing.

#### Example 5

An example of double spacing. An example of double spacing. An example of double spacing. An example of double spacing. An example of double spacing.

## Writing Japanese Words in English

Sometimes in your essays you will want to write Japanese words. This is particularly the case when writing about aspects of Japanese culture. There are a number of rules to follow when you are using Japanese words.

- The most familiar romanization for English speakers is the Hepburn System. Be careful not to use “Japanese word processor spelling”. English speakers will understand sushi, but not susi; Kyushu, not Kyusyu; and so on.
- Use macrons for a long vowel sound on unfamiliar words. Yuubari → Yūbari. On familiar words (such as Hokkaido) you do not need to use a macron.
- If the word is very familiar in English, you can just use the Japanese word: e.g. “Sushi is very popular.” But, if the word is not familiar, you must put the Japanese word in italics and give a translation or explanation. e.g. “I went to an *onsen* (hot spring) at the weekend.”
- You do not use italics if the Japanese word is a name (of a person, town, company etc.). e.g. “I got off the train at Shin-Sapporo Station.”

These rules might seem complicated, but writing Japanese words in English is an important skill.

## Conclusions

This essay has discussed some of the most general aspects of structure and formatting in academic writing. There are various conventions and rules that you should follow. Other rules relating to citations have not been discussed this time. They will be covered next time.

As discussed in the first video of the Academic Writing series, originality is an important aspect of academic work. Not every academic essay has to follow the same pattern or structure. If you can think of a creative way to make your arguments, feel free to do so. But check your teacher's instructions or the guidelines in the academic journal first.

The last key point is this. Whatever style you use, the golden rule is *consistency*. Once you have started an essay using one style, continue using it to the end. Remember that good organization in your structure and formatting creates the impression that you have good organization in your arguments, too. When people reading your essays think that, you have taken the first important step towards being a good researcher.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Philip Seaton is an Associate Professor in the Research Faculty of Media and Communication, Hokkaido University.

<sup>2</sup> You can check the word count of your essay using the word count function. This essay is 1,596 words long. In academic writing, it is very important to stay within the word limit.

<sup>3</sup> This is an example of a footnote. It gives additional information not needed in the text. Sometimes footnotes also appear at the end of a page. Footnotes will be discussed more in video three of the Academic Writing series.

## **Bibliography**

Seaton, Philip (2009) "Introduction to Academic Writing 1", online Webtube English II materials (Accessed 23 May 2009).