

# Understanding US Academic Writing Conventions

Writing has many genres and styles that all differ across geography and time. In fact, the idea of there being a single US academic convention in itself is a bit of a misnomer. US academic writing does differ across various genres too, and depends on whether you are an Undergraduate or Masters-level student, or a scholar etc. In general, however, this article focuses on understanding the basics of undergraduate writing conventions, so that you can use them for your upcoming assignment. If you are an undergraduate student (especially freshman or sophomore) this information would be most useful to you.

## The two W of conventions

### Why does the convention matter?

Because it exists, and because understanding the system can help you respond to the prompts better. Language is complicated, quirky and highly susceptible to change over time and space. The English spoken in London for example, differs a lot idiomatically and even grammatically from English spoken in, say, Singapore or New York. A writing system exists, ideally, to systematize sharing of information, so that there is less discrepancy that comes in communicating to a larger audience from writing itself. It is a method of standardizing a variant of prose that is resilient to dramatic changes in languages. Academic writing, therefore, is not the only way to write, or the best way to write. It is simply, one way to write. It is the way that academics use to communicate across different academic communities their thoughts, research findings, opinions and do so in the most systematized way. This goal is, of-course, too idealistic and simplistic when specific instances are considered, yet it works at large. The aim of writing in convention is to address an idea, a question or an argument in a directed, concise, and organized manner.

### What are the conventions exactly?

This is how a paper roughly breaks down:

#### **Introduction**

- [1] Context
- [2] Thesis
- [3] Roadmap

#### **Argument Paragraph**

- [4] Supporting
- [5] Counter Arguments (Optional)

#### **[6] Conclusion (From NC State Writing)**

Imagine a systematized way to convince someone that the opinion you have is an accurate representation of something you are arguing about. What would be the first thing you would do?

[1] Assuming that this person is generally aware about the topic at hand, our best bet would be to provide a context to this person that helps them align their view of the said issue with yours. In short, context and introduction at large is a useful tool to help the audience situate themselves to your logic of reasoning before you begin to lay out your arguments. The best strategy therefore is to begin broadly, as a means to connect with the audience, slowly narrowing your focus such that the readers are able to align themselves to your line of reasoning.

[2] Now that you have introduced your line of reasoning, it seems natural to present your argument in its bare minimum. This is called a thesis and our team has already covered this topic. Check *How to create an effective thesis on our website*.

[3] With your argument introduced, it works to divide one's argument into simplified sub-sections that, at large, make a case in favor of your argument. We will talk about that soon, but this section is a way to state what your essay will cover. Conventionally, it is one or two sentence long.

[4] Any argument that favors your arguments comes next. This is a way to allow the reader, who knows your general argument and context, to find evidence that helps support your argument. This is done by presenting your supporting argument paragraph. This paragraph follows a similar structure to the larger essay wherein you begin by introducing an important element of your research/argument that you will focus on followed by evidence that supports the claim made. You end the paragraphs by concluding the idea and connecting it to the larger thesis. Remember, academic writing emphasizes the role of careful and meticulous exploration of a subject, and an important aspect of such exploration is to find evidence that supports your thesis. This is your opportunity to highlight those.

[5] In the spirit of thinking critically, it is expected that your reader will counter your argument with their own. This is an opportunity to acknowledge and incorporate them in your writing. A counter-argument paragraph looks similar to other body paragraphs, except that it begins by acknowledging an opposing viewpoint. One often provides evidence, counter arguments, or acknowledgment of exceptions as a way to improve and clarify the scope of your paper. Students often find this section counter-productive, admitting to feeling like this exercise feels self-defeating. In reality, this section exists to build your arguments by highlighting both -- its potential effectiveness and ineffectiveness.

[6] With your argument layed out, it is possible to end there. However, it might be effective, as the convention suggests, to bring back your reader's attention to your thesis again and also reminding the reader why the argument was made in the first place? Why was reading your paper important? This is also known as stakes.

Note: Each course and department might slightly adjust the format of an academic paper based on their methodology, but in general the later-mentioned rules shall hold true at large (aka when in doubt) and also if you are starting college and taking courses that require you to write an academic essay.

## **Language and Rule Breaking**

Academic writing brings with it a certain standard of language that requires maintaining. This involves avoiding usage of slang phrases and vocabulary. It is also expected of the writer to

focus more on the topic at hand rather than themselves. This means avoiding personal pronouns and construction of passive sentences. Here is an example:

*Instead of* “In this paper, I will argue that...”

*Use this* “Through this paper, it will be argued that.”

At this point, it is good to acknowledge that while these rules exist and often can be limiting, they ideally exist for a reason. Something this article tries to prioritize. After understanding rules is the best way to break them. Do not take these rules as abiding decrees that one must always adhere to, instead use them as suggestions. Suggestions that will help when you have to write an essay for a class, and when you feel the need to break a rule, because it doesn't suit your writing, take the opportunity to reflect on it and if need be break it.

### **Resources to refer to:**

[For your questions about citation](#)

[For improving writing comprehension](#)

### **Citation**

[What is academic writing?](#)

[Conventions of U.S. Academic Writing](#)