



Basic Tips for ESL Students: Writing for an American Academic Audience

If you come to an American university from another country, you will find that your instructors' writing expectations can often be difficult to understand. Many instructors are unaware of the differences in the approach to writing that other nationalities and cultures have, and even if they were aware, ESL students would still be expected to write academic essays in an "American" fashion. This handout touches on some of the basic qualities of an academic essay written in the United States.

State Your Thesis

American academic essays are usually "thesis-driven." This means that you as the writer must explain the *main point* of your essay at the start. A thesis statement is a sentence or two that

- (1) shows the purpose of the essay
- (2) indicates the basic components of the essay
- (3) offers the unique perspective of the writer

The thesis-driven essay may be different from non-American writing forms, in which the thesis is often implied, delayed, or delivered at the end of the essay. Consider the thesis statement a concise version of the entire essay, which usually appears in the introductory section of an essay.

Here's an example of a thesis for an informative essay:

The experiment failed because of the presence of helium in the vat; the helium tainted the purity of the environment and caused the data to be irrevocably skewed.

Notice that this thesis is short but reveals the most important ideas.

Here's an example of a thesis for an argument essay:

Purdue University should offer more scholarships to international students because they have a greater desire to succeed in college, tend to work harder, and graduate more quickly and with greater frequency than American students.

This type of thesis usually states the primary goal of the argument and then indicates the reasons or points you will make in the essay to support the argument. Subsequently, every assertion that you make afterward must be related to the thesis statement. The rest of the essay must clarify or support your thesis.

Use Linear Structure

Once the thesis statement is established, the rest of the essay must "flow." How does this happen? It helps if you create an outline of the paper. The most rudimentary structure for an academic essay, the 5-part essay, is as follows:

- Part 1. Introduction, followed by the thesis (3 points to be made)
- Part 2. Point 1.
- Part 3. Point 2.
- Part 4. Point 3.
- Part 5. Conclusion

Additionally, argument essays tend to include a section of informative background data on the topic, plus a section citing and refuting possible objections to the argument.

Use Transitions

Connect the different sections of your paper with transitions. Transitions are words (like *however, therefore, additionally, thus, and also*) or phrases (like *for example, on the other hand, and in conclusion*) that show a link between a paragraph and the one that precedes it. You usually put a transition at the beginning of the paragraph to connect it to the previous one. One very useful way to create a transition sentence is to identify a key word or phrase in the previous sentence and repeat it in your transition sentence.

Example:

The remaining workers were laid off because they were considered expendable, a drain on the company's budget. Also expendable was the company's organizational vision. The initial charter stated that the company would. . . .

Be Direct, Concise, and to the Point

Most professors in American universities are not impressed by a complicated writing style, one which uses lots of complex sentence structures, overly formal words, and the continuous repetition of ideas. If you can keep your style simple, you will be less likely to commit errors in grammar and thus more likely to hold the interest of your reader.

What Else Should I Know?

Talk often with your professors. They know best what they want to see in your work, and often you will understand an assignment better if they can talk to you about it one-to-one. Scholars in the West believe that published academic work is the intellectual property solely of the one who creates the work. When you use other people's words or ideas in your own writing, you must give them credit; failure to do so is called plagiarism, which amounts to theft! The Writing Lab has a handout and research handbooks that show you how to avoid plagiarism.

Understand that learning English is a process, not something that is immediately acquired, like a new car, nor are language difficulties something to be "fixed." Don't be discouraged by difficulty—no one, not even native users of a language, ever becomes perfect in a language. Set reasonable goals that you can achieve over a long period of time. The tutors in the Writing Lab can help you set these goals and check your progress.

Schedule time each week to work on English skills not related to your academic work. Talk with English-speaking friends, read local newspapers, and find out about the cultures around you. Also, the Writing Lab offers you a self-study center that helps you work on reading, speaking, and listening at your own pace. You can also make appointments to talk with tutors about your papers.

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