

# Writing in an Academic Style Module: Introduction

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## What is Academic Style?

Writing tasks are different across different academic disciplines and to some extent the language use will be quite different from one subject to another. However, there are some aspects of writing for university studies which are common to all. In this course we will focus on characteristic features of successful academic style across the disciplines.

Written texts used in most academic contexts need to be:

<b>impersonal</b>	to sound objective
<b>clear</b>	easy for the reader to understand
<b>formal</b>	to sound authoritative
<b>well-organised</b>	signalling relationships between ideas and facts.

## Who is this module for?

All students at university who need to improve their knowledge of Academic Style in order to write more clearly and accurately.




## What does this module cover?

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Unit 1	Sounding Impersonal
Unit 2	Sounding Formal
Unit 3	Writing Clear Paragraphs

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## Exercises

These are marked with the icon  and you should try to complete them before checking your work in the **Answer Key**, marked  .

## Answer Key to all Exercises

This can be found at the end of the Unit.

# Writing in an Academic Style

## Unit 3: Writing Clear Paragraphs

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### 1.0 Introduction

In this unit we will consider the logical structuring of paragraphs, in particular the first sentence of a paragraph in academic writing. For more in depth discussion of paragraph structuring see Unit 1 and Unit 2 of the Cohesive Writing module.

### Objectives of Unit 3

After you have completed this unit you should be able to:

- understand the functional logic of a paragraph in academic writing.
- understand how to write a well-organised and clearly structured paragraph when developing your academic discussion.
- recognise the way in which information is structured when reading and researching for assignments.

### 1.1 The Topic Sentence

When the first sentence of a paragraph acts as a Theme for the whole paragraph it is called a **Topic sentence**.

If the first sentence is going to be the theme for the paragraph, it needs to be some kind of generalisation.

A Topic sentence therefore has *two parts*:

- the **first part** of the sentence indicates the **Topic** under consideration in the paragraph
- the **final part** indicates in general terms what the writer wants to say about the topic, termed here **Comment**.

### Examples

1. The low educational achievement of aboriginal students has three main causes.  
**Topic** **Comment**
2. The measurement of Gross Domestic Product is quite problematic.  
**Topic** **Comment**

3. A circulatory system serves several functions with respect to the organism and its metabolism.

**Topic**

**Comment**

**Note:** Sometimes there is no Topic but just the introductory word 'there'.

e.g. There are three kinds of sanctions which can be imposed.

### Why begin with a generalisation of this kind?

The topic sentence acts as a signpost allowing the reader to predict what will be said next in the rest of the paragraph. If the readers know what kind of meaning to expect they will understand the writing more easily. This is important in academic writing generally and it is especially important when English is not your first language and grammatical errors may make the text more difficult to understand.

### Paragraph Analysis

Read the following paragraph. Try to recognise the features that make this a well-structured paragraph.

Topic Sentence	Over the past 30 years, <b>research in the health arena</b> has attracted <b>psychologists, anthropologists</b> and <b>sociologists</b> .
Paragraph middle	The focus of <b>psychological research</b> in this area is concerned with individual motives, attitudes and beliefs in relation to both health and illness. <b>Anthropological studies</b> , however, are concerned with culture and health care. Such studies concentrate on illness as a cultural product and on the way social and cultural life in the past affects beliefs about health and illness. <b>In sociological studies</b> the emphasis is similar, but focussed more on social relations within a particular social structure with respect to medical care.

1. What are the Themes of the paragraph?
2. What is the relation between the Topic sentence and those Themes?

If we analyse the way in which the information has been presented in this text, it is apparent **three Themes** have been established in the main Topic in the first sentence.

Over the past 30 years, **research in the health arena**

**Topic**

has attracted **a) psychologists, b) anthropologists, and c) sociologists.**

**Comment**

Notice how the sub-themes a), b) and c) presented within the Comment of the topic sentence are developed in the middle of the paragraph following the same order.

a) The focus of **psychological research** in this area is concerned with individual motives, attitudes and beliefs on relation to both health and illness.

b) **Anthropological studies**, however, are concerned with culture and health care. Such studies concentrate on a conception of disease as a cultural product and on the way social and cultural life in the past affects beliefs about health and illness.

c) In **sociological studies**, the emphasis is similar, but focussed more on social relations within a particular social structure with respect to medical care.

Topic Sentence	
Topic	Over the past 30 years, <b>research in the health arena</b>
Comment	has attracted <b>psychologists, anthropologists and sociologists.</b>
Paragraph middle	The focus of <b>psychological research</b> in this area is concerned with individual motives, attitudes and beliefs in relation to both health and illness. <b>Anthropological studies</b> , however, are concerned with culture and health care. Such studies concentrate on illness as a cultural product and on the way social and cultural life in the past affects beliefs about health and illness. <b>In sociological studies</b> the emphasis is similar, but focussed more on social relations within a particular social structure with respect to medical care.

Each of the sentence Themes in the paragraph has a comment containing the points to be developed.

Sentence Theme	Sentence comment
The focus of <b>psychological research</b> in this area	is concerned with <b>individual motives, attitudes and beliefs</b> in relation to both <b>health and illness.</b> ,
<b>Anthropological studies</b> , however	are concerned with <b>culture and health care.</b> Such studies concentrate on illness as a cultural product and on the way social and cultural life in the past affects beliefs about health and illness.
<b>In sociological studies</b>	the emphasis is similar, but focussed more on social relations within a particular <b>social structure</b> with respect to <b>medical care.</b>

### ★ Exercise 1

Look at the following Topic sentences. For each example note what the content of the rest of the paragraph is likely to be.

1. The economic recession in 1974 is considered to be the result of a number of coinciding factors.
2. Signs of malnutrition may include growth retardation, low body weight and, in extreme cases, seriously misshapen bodies.
3. Legal incapacitation aims at providing protection for the community by isolating offenders from society.

★ ★ You can now check the answers in the Answer Key at the back of the unit.

### ★ Exercise 2

Decide which of the following would be the kind of generalisation that could serve as a topic sentence (i.e. paragraph Theme). Ask yourselves:

a) does it make a generalisation?

b) does it allow you to predict what kind of statements might follow?

Tick **YES** for the Topic sentence.

		Topic Sentence	
		YES	NO
1.	Sexual discrimination still exists in the workplace and in the education system.	[ ]	[ ]
2.	The next step was education for all children and the abolition of child labour.	[ ]	[ ]
3.	Confucius's aim was to effect reforms through his teachings until there was an opportunity for him to direct the government.	[ ]	[ ]
4.	The status of the concept of intelligence is a controversial matter.	[ ]	[ ]
5.	Understanding lectures at university is a major problem for foreign students.	[ ]	[ ]
6.	In the 1950's the gradual depletion of black coal	[ ]	[ ]

reserves resulted in an attempt to find alternative energy sources.

7. The British Government passed a tariff protection law in 1974. [ ] [ ]
8. The long-held association between poverty and domestic violence has recently been questioned by two research studies. [ ] [ ]
9. These claims by Norwegian scholars rely on ambiguous results. [ ] [ ]
10. Several experiments have been conducted on national stereotyping in the last fifty years. [ ] [ ]

★ ★ You can now check the answers in the Answer Key at the back of the unit.

### ★ Exercise 3

Now read the following short paragraphs and write a Topic sentence for each. Remember it should be a generalisation that predicts what follows:

1.

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The first GDP method is the 'income received method', whereby the income received by the owners of productive resources is found by adding the wages, rent, interest and profit earned at each stage in the production. The second means of measurement, 'the production method' can be found using either the 'final product' or the 'value added', thus providing a figure for 'value of production'.

2.

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In the earliest times, people carved or painted messages on rocks. Later on, people began to write on pieces of leather, which were rolled into scrolls. In the Middle Ages, heavy paper called parchment was used for writing; books were laboriously copied by hand. Then in the middle of the fifteenth century, with the invention of the printing press, the birth of the modern printing industry was possible. And now the advent of computers is rapidly revolutionising the process of communication.

3.

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Adults who beat other adults are charged with assault under state legislation. However, it is not a criminal offence for an adult to hit a child in order for the child to obey a command. They are often

viewed as victims of their own parenting and of societal stresses on the family unit (Scutt, 1983:42). This anomaly in legislation needs to be amended to give equal rights with adults.

4.

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The convenience of the small car for the urban commuter lies in the greater ease with which it can be parked, and the smaller spaces needed by them. The economies of using a small car include lower price, lower petrol consumption and lower maintenance costs.

★ ★ You can now check the answers in the Answer Key at the back of the unit.

#### ★ Exercise 4

Read the following paragraph from the student text. Then answer the questions which follow.

The Chinese population in this country is becoming significant. According to a paper from the Department of Community Services and Health (1990), in 1988 the Chinese population was one of the largest ethnic groups. It was ranked fifth in size behind the German, Italian, Greek and Dutch communities. Population projections indicate that the Chinese population will continue to increase more rapidly than most other groups. They will represent 5.5% of the population by the year 2030 if the migration levels of recent years are maintained. Evidence is also available that shows that in about 45% of the Chinese population, their proficiency of English is classified as "not at all" or "not well" (ABS 1986). In addition to the vast differences in cultural characteristics between Chinese and Anglo-Celtics, it is urgent to look at their behaviour in using medical services.

1. Does the topic sentence predict the information which follows?
2. Rewrite the paragraph only on the Theme in the Topic sentence.

★ ★ You can now check the answers in the Answer Key at the back of the unit.

 Exercise 5

Read the following extract from an essay entitled:



**How do children behave morally?** and answer the questions.

*Lecturer's comment: "... a little too descriptive..."*

1. What is the issue being discussed?
2. Compose a Topic sentence that clearly sets up what the discussion is about.

Through Piaget's study on how children came to respect the rules of the game of marbles, he proposed four stages in moral development. In the stage which includes children up to about two years old, no rules exist. In stage two, children from two to six years old become conscious of rules. However, they only imitate and obey instructions to their own ends. They are not capable of relating to others. In the third stage, children from seven to ten are still unable to understand the rules. In the last stage, children from eleven to twelve develop abstract reasoning. Rules are understood and viewed as the product of mutual consent.

Following Piaget, Kohlberg proposed a similar developmental theory based on his studies of fifty American males. Six stages were constructed. He claimed that each subject had gone through the same sequence of stages. These stages are divided into three levels: pre-conventional, conventional and post-conventional. In the initial level, an individual has no perception of society. His behaviour is mainly based on the pleasure-pain principle. In the conventional level, he becomes aware of the importance of others and is ready to conform to majority behaviour and to maintain social order by performing his duty. Finally, he may reach the state of autonomy. The movement from the first to the fourth stage may be facilitated by the wider and more adequate perception of the social system.

  You can now check the answers in the Answer Key at the back of the unit.



## Unit 3: Answer Key to Exercises

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### ★ ★ Exercise 1: Answer

1. The coinciding factors considered to have resulted in the 1974 economic recession.
2. How growth retardation, low body weight and, in extreme cases, seriously misshapen bodies may indicate malnutrition.
3. How the effect of legal incapacitation i.e. isolating offenders from society provides protection for the community.

### ★ ★ Exercise 2: Answer

		Topic Sentence	
		YES	NO
1.	Sexual discrimination still exists in the workplace and in the education system.	[ ✓ ]	[ ]
2.	The next step was education for all children and the abolition of child labour.	[ ]	[ ✓ ]
3.	Confucius's aim was to effect reforms through his teachings until there was an opportunity for him to direct the government.	[ ]	[ ✓ ]
4.	The status of the concept of intelligence is a controversial matter.	[ ✓ ]	[ ]
5.	Understanding lectures at university is a major problem for foreign students.	[ ✓ ]	[ ]
6.	In the 1950's the gradual depletion of black coal reserves resulted in an attempt to find alternative energy sources.	[ ✓ ]	[ ]
7.	The British Government passed a tariff protection law in 1974.	[ ✓ ]	[ ]
8.	The long-held association between poverty and domestic violence has recently been questioned by two research studies.	[ ✓ ]	[ ]
9.	These claims by Norwegian scholars rely on ambiguous results.	[ ]	[ ✓ ]

10. Several experiments have been conducted on national stereotyping in the last fifty years. [ ✓ ] [ ]

  **Exercise 3: Answer**

Suggested Topic sentences:

1. GDP can be measured in three different ways.
2. The development of written communication can be divided into five main stages.
3. State legislation does not fully protect the rights of children.
4. Driving small cars in urban areas is practical for several reasons.

  **Exercise 4: Answer**

1. The topic sentence does not predict the discussion at the end of the paragraph concerning the proficiency levels of English within the Chinese population; the cultural differences between the Chinese and the Anglo-Celtics; and the use of medical services.
2. The Chinese population in this country is becoming significant. According to a paper from the Department of Community Services and Health (1990), in 1988 the Chinese population was one of the largest ethnic communities. It was ranked fifth in size behind the German, Italian, Greek and Dutch communities. Population projections indicate that the Chinese population will continue to increase more rapidly than other major groups. They will represent 5.5% of the population by 2030 if the migration levels of recent years are maintained.

  **Exercise 5: Answer**

1. The issue being discussed is Piaget's and Kohlberg's theories defining the development of children's moral behaviour.

2. Suggested Topic sentence:

Piaget's and Kohlberg's theories assume that moral development is achieved through an individual's progression through a pre-determined sequence.