

# Lexicon and Register – Writing for Academic Purposes

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In academic writing, being able to communicate is not always enough. Academic essays should be written in an academic register. There are many different registers which can be used in writing. Consider the following review from the business and entertainment magazine, *Variety*:

Klein provocatively provides her take on historical context, tracing many of today's woes back to the Enlightenment notion that nature is a beast to be tamed, by any means necessary, and then forced to fulfil human needs. From that idea, Klein claims, **it's a not-terribly-difficult** leap for rapacious capitalists to view any exploitation of nature to be permissible as long as it is profitable — and if that harms the environment and/or other human beings, **well, chalk that up** to unavoidable collateral damage. (BLA 2014)

The underlined points may be suitable in an academic context; those in bold are not suitable in academic essay writing. They are casual and conversational.

Compare to the following review from an academic journal:

Laura Wright's *Wilderness into Civilized Shapes* is also located at the intersection of **postcolonial studies** and **ecocriticism**, although it is more **traditional** in its focus on literary fiction, specifically on how postcolonial novels represent landscapes and environmental issues within the realm of the imaginary. While Wright does not propose an overarching new theoretical framework, her book is significant for its advocacy and sensitive practice of a **broad-ranging comparativism**. (Deckard 2012)

Notice the direct and depersonalised style, the distance between author and audience, as well as the assumption of understanding of the terms in bold. Even terms like “traditional” in the context of academic writing might be somewhat different from the casual use of the term.

The register and lexicon of both sections are specific to their purposes. One is for entertainment, the other for academics and students. To determine whether a piece of writing is in an academic register, investigate the following:

- Who is the audience (academic / popular / industry etc.)?
- What kind of tone does the writer use (casual / formal)?
- What is the lexicon, meaning the particular vocabulary and word associations in a particular piece? Articles which use theoretical terms fluidly, without defining the terms, are most likely using an academic lexicon.
- What is the context of the article? Is it in a journal associated with an academic imprint?

Though students are encouraged to develop their own writing style, it is essential to emulate styles conducive to academic writing. Stay clear of:

- Casual turns of phrase (**in bold** in the first example).
- Journalistic style (the first example).
- Personalised approach (“I feel,” “I think”).

You should:

- Begin with a thesis statement, the central premise of your argument.
- Structure your argument with an introduction, development of principal points (outlined in your introduction) through successive paragraphs, and conclusion.
- Be concrete in your analysis (the second example).
- Use appropriate terms according to your discipline (the second example).
- Be certain! “This essay will demonstrate...” /// “It can be argued...”

For more information on using academic register, follow the links below:

<https://writing.princeton.edu/sites/writing/files/lexicon.pdf>

<https://www.tcd.ie/CAPSL/readysteadywrite/AcademicWritingHandbook.pdf>

<http://www.york.ac.uk/res/elanguages/index/Modulecd/cu4s4/cu4s40501.htm>