

# Common Student Mistakes in Academic Writing

Brett J. Gall, Duke University

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## Motivation

Undergraduate students in the social sciences write many papers and readings responses during their years of studies. Although universities often offer various resources for learning how to write and edit, few students typically take advantage of the resources university writing centers make available to students. Furthermore, course instructors typically are concerned with teaching their course content and evaluating students' ability to articulate their own ideas or those from the course. However, instructors rarely commit any resources to helping students understand *how* to articulate ideas. As a result, students often find themselves learning through trial and error how to write coherently, cogently, and succinctly.

In this document, I aim to save students time and effort by hopefully helping students skip a lot of costly trial and error. The ultimate goal is to get straight to writing good academic papers. However, this is *not* a document on how to write a good academic paper. Rather, this is a document on how to *avoid writing a bad paper*. The ingredients and recipes that generally foster good analytic writing are well-documented in other resources, but here I focus on common mistakes students make in writing academic papers. Although this is predominantly beneficial for students earlier in their academic studies, it may also benefit those who find themselves struggling with writing at any stage of their career.

A word of caution: the academic paper is a somewhat unique form of writing and should not be mistaken with other formats, such as creative writing, blog posts, opinion articles, or news articles. The academic paper is focused on motivating/contextualizing, explaining, and persuading about the importance and validity of an idea through rigorous argumentation and analysis of evidence (where relevant). While academic writing typically involves substantial creativity, these goals differ substantially from telling an detailed, emotional story, for example.

Finally, remember: a lot of universities have student writing centers! Take

advantage of these resources. Sometimes they will read over papers with you and this is a free opportunity to improve your writing.

## 1 Verbosity

There is a quote from either Blaise Pascal or Mark Twain (both of which are credited with a number of clever lines they likely never wrote or said) along the lines of, "I would have written a shorter letter, but I did not have the time." Writing concisely to stay within page limits and/or to articulate your point clearly and quickly is difficult! Many students find themselves struggling to fall within word or page constraints because they confuse verbosity for substance.

A useful heuristic for evaluating your writing is to ask, "Does this sentence or word contribute to setting up or advancing my argument? If so, is it nice, but not necessary?" While varying sentence structure and tone often makes your writing more pleasant, never sacrifice concision and careful articulation for style. Students are particularly prone to err in two ways:

- Writing the narrative/set-up: you want to motivate your paper and argument, but do not need to tell us the entire history of the topic you are writing about. While more information is interesting, it can distract from your main point!
- Using filler words: for example, "Doctor X was a very important person" doesn't need the "very." It is imperative that we know they are very important and not simply important?

## 2 Focusing on Opinion and Affect

A crucial aspect of science is impartiality and rigor. Rather than reject arguments and evidence based on their *conclusions*, conclusions are rejected on the basis of the logic, measurement, and evidence producing the conclusions. Feelings and opinions in themselves should have little bearing on how you should evaluate readings: when scientists observe convincing evidence and valid reasoning, they update their beliefs about the world. For example, responding to the evidence and theorizing that the Earth is round with, "I don't believe it, I feel like this isn't correct, the Earth is flat" is not analytical. Flat earthers may be right after all, but they would need to present theory and evidence. For example, a flat earther might scientifically reject the evidence for the round earth hypothesis by showing problems with the measurement of some important conditions. Writing about the extent to which you (dis)like a conclusion is perhaps a reasonable approach for opinion-based editorials, but not the goal of academic writing.

### 3 Lack of Analysis

Instructor expectations regarding writing responses are typically misunderstood and consequentially are often not met. Writing responses are often a means of evaluating student understanding of an article, rather than (a) a demonstration you completed the reading through regurgitation of what you read or (b) a description of your attitudes toward the article. Reading is not understanding. Stating how you feel about the reading is not analysis.

Without becoming too fussy over what it means to understand, preferably students should aim to briefly summarize the argument they read and proceed to analyze the argument from a “scientific” perspective. Help us understand something about the research that is not self-evident. Examples of this might include:

- Showing an implicit, unacknowledged assumption of the author.
- Showing the logic of the argument is not valid: the conclusions do not follow from the assumptions.
- Evaluating the plausibility of the reading’s assumptions: are they consistent with the evidence?
- Identifying new, interesting applications of the ideas from the reading
- Showing a non-explicated implication of the ideas in the article for other phenomena

Whether you choose one or many of these approaches (or perhaps even another approach!) is up to you. However, always keep in mind the goal is to conduct analysis.

### 4 Thesaurus Abuse

Undergraduates often think complicated, sophisticated language enhances the “seriousness” or perceived rigor of argumentation. It doesn’t! Rather than make us take you seriously, it makes us less able to understand what you are trying to say. If we cannot understand what you intend to articulate, we can’t give you constructive feedback nor can we provide points on your assignments. Abandon the mining of your thesaurus for fancy words and embrace semantic simplicity and clarity.

### 5 Spelling and Grammatical Mistakes

Conduct a spell-check of your document and read it over once or twice to make sure there are no typos or grammatical errors. Proper spelling and grammar do not undermine your argument, but they make it more difficult to follow. You want to make it easier for others to read your writing!

## 6 Overemphasis of First-Order Effects

Changes in behavior and institutions often have both direct and indirect effects. Oftentimes students focus too much on the direct effect of such changes without considering either the indirect effects or the tradeoffs between direct and indirect effects. For example, a student might propose a substantial increase in the national minimum wage to reduce working poverty through an increase in the wages of low-wage workers (the direct effect) but fail to consider the indirect effects of the policy on employers, the unemployed, prices, etc. Make explicit and demonstrate a careful understanding of the incentives and choices available to all relevant actors when considering causes and effects! Understanding tradeoffs is crucial to understanding behavior.

## 7 Disorganized Thinking/Poor Structure

Good academic writing follows a few basic principles of writing. This does not mean an academic essay must follow a formula, let alone the standard expository essay you may have learned prior to attending university. However, there are a few structural differences between academic writing and other writing that arguably makes writing an academic essay easier!

First, each section of your writing should naturally follow from the previous section. When writing jumps from one idea to the next, the reader often becomes confused about what you are actually trying to argue. Always ask yourself if you are making clear how one paragraph relates to another.

Second, follow the advice of newspaper editorial staff and never “bury the lede.” Tell us your argument and contribution as early as possible while still providing appropriate context to motivate the argument and contribution. Unlike a mystery novel, academic writing should not have any surprises: we should know what you are going to argue and the main body of the paper is to provide the nitty gritty details of why you are arguing something and why it is right.

One beneficial strategy to ensuring you have well-structured writing is to (a) explicitly include a roadmap to your argument in the introduction of your paper and (b) implement the following workflow:

1. Write an outline stating each point you want to make in each paragraph. The skeleton of the argument should be clear enough from the outline for others to assess its validity.
2. Write the introduction. For analytical papers, the introduction should include a brief motivation of the problem or question you are aiming to address and why it is important, your answer/contribution, and then a quick roadmap of how your paper is structured. For example, “Although everyone believes X, I argue X is not true. The contribution in this paper

is important because whether X is true or not ultimately determines the success or failure of governments around the world adopting policy Y. In the following paper, I first demonstrate that everyone believes X. I then provide evidence from a new measurement strategy to show X is not true and discuss the implications of this novel finding for public policy more broadly.”

3. Fill in the body of the paper using language that makes each idea from your outline flow together nicely.
4. Write the conclusion.

## 8 Long Sentences

Long sentences are difficult to read and typically reflect muddled thinking. They are useful and even necessary at times, yet the circumstances under which a page-long sentence is the best way of communicating your argument are rare.