



Running head: ACADEMIC WRITING



Academic Writing: Integrating Theory and Practice

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Academic Writing: Integrating Theory and Practice

The purpose of this paper is to provide an overview of some of the current trends in academic writing. There are many possible approaches to writing. My knowledge of academic writing comes from my experiences as a graduate student at the University of Victoria and as a professor supervising graduate students at the University of Victoria and at Royal Roads University. In this paper, I illustrate the mechanics of formatting for the American Psychological Association (APA) style (American Psychological Association [APA], 2001) and provide guidelines for leadership practitioners who are producing graduate-level writing. Five guidelines are key: (a) identifying the positioning of the author, (b) attributing actions, (c) using the active voice and the present tense, (d) using the technique of framing for achieving clarity, and (e) including multiple perspectives.

Starting From Where You Are Positioned

In sociological theory, the most significant categorizations in North American society are race, class, and sex. Every person has a position as a member of a particular social class, race, and sex. Practitioners who are studying life in organizations need to be aware of where they are positioned within a formal role in their organization. Several theorists (see Denzin, 1997; Kirby & McKenna, 1989; St. Pierre & Pillow, 2000; Stringer, 1999) advise writers to identify clearly their positioning and their assumptions about the situation, so that readers can better interpret their statements. Readers will interpret the following statement differently depending on who is making the statement:

The School Board members made a wise decision in the circumstances. They listened to the statements of the parents and the students affected by the decision to close the school, gave them careful consideration, and then made a decision. I am confident that this is the best decision given the difficult circumstances that we face. (Alberta. School District 13, 2004, p. 9)

Readers will interpret this statement differently when they know if the author is the chair of the School Board or the parent who led the Save Our School advocacy campaign. Readers learn something from knowing your position in various organizations and in society because the experiences commonly shared by people in particular positions help to shape their identities.

The common experience of being positioned as a white male school principal, a black female elementary teacher, or an aboriginal male oil-well driller does not reveal everything about how you view the world. A written document should include a description of how you view the situation or conditions

you are depicting. A statement of your perspective on the situation places you within the context and helps to avoid the traditional “mask of scientific objectivity” that advocated keeping the identity and thoughts of the writer hidden. Theorists increasingly challenged the ideal of objectivity for writers in the decades following the Second World War. One critique is Donna Haraway’s depiction of scientific objectivity as a “god-trick of seeing everything from nowhere” (1991, para. 13). She prefers the concept of “embodied objectivity” where writers reveal their situated knowledges within specific physical, social, and cognitive spaces.

Attributing actions.

It is often difficult for academic writers to develop a writing style that is embodied. Adherents of a traditional writing style encourage the use of techniques, such as the third person and the passive voice, as a means of conveying objectivity. These characteristics still occur in the physical sciences literature, but writers in the human sciences, such as leadership studies, use a more embodied approach that encourages appropriate attribution. Appropriate attribution means (a) using the first person; (b) avoiding reification or anthropomorphism, which is writing about organizations as if they are people; and (c) avoiding the editorial “we” (APA, 2001, pp. 37–40). Following APA guidelines will make your writing more direct and honest (see Table 1).

Table 1 *Guidelines for Attributing Actions*

Guidelines	Poor example	Better example
Prefer first person	The researcher selected five key concepts for the literature review.	I selected five key concepts for the literature review.
Avoid anthropomorphism	The administration decided to change the job descriptions.	The administrators decided to change the job descriptions.
Avoid editorial we	We often do not want parents to come into our classrooms.	Teachers often do not want parents to come into their classrooms.

The APA guidelines for attributing actions are consistent with its recommendation to prefer the active voice and the present tense. All of these guidelines improve the quality of academic writing by encouraging the use of sentences that identify clearly who is acting.



Active voice and present tense techniques for powerful writing.

A current concern about revealing situated knowledges is one reason that people who write in the human sciences prefer to use the active voice and the present tense, when appropriate. The APA publication manual recommends using the active voice and selecting the tense carefully (2001, p. 41).

A sentence written in the passive voice disguises the source of the action. An example of a passive sentence from the video *Dowling for Columbine* is, “The bullets were purchased from K-Mart” (Moore, 2002). This passive sentence construction is common at the draft stage of writing papers. In education, it is common for learners to write about organizational decision making in the passive voice, i.e., “A new travel policy was approved by the Board” (Alberta. School Division 13, 2004, p. 12). The passive voice makes the policy appear to be more important than the people who approved the policy. This relationship shifts when you write the sentence in active voice, “The School Board members approved a new policy for travel” (p. 12). Writing in the active voice makes it easier to identify the source of an action, sometimes referred to as the *agency* of the people who acted. The concept of human agency is central to leadership studies, as “leadership acts” are performed by people who take action and act as “agents of change.” The active voice makes it easier to identify agency.

The present tense makes a description of a situation more powerful and immediate. Avoid using the past tense to refer to conditions that likely still exist. Write beliefs, opinions, and research findings in the present tense whenever possible. If people tell you that they highly value diversity and equality in schools, use the present tense to describe their values (e.g., They place a high value on diversity and equality). Use the past tense when you are describing specific actions that occurred in the past, (e.g., I asked him about his values). If you use the past tense too often, your research findings will seem remote and in the past instead of relevant and of immediate significance.

These five guidelines share a commonality; they clarify agency, making writing more direct and understandable (see Figure 1). Writing about leadership requires directness about agency that is missing from some management texts. Agency makes the hierarchical authority relationships and the informal power relationships in organizations easier to identify and, therefore, easier to influence and change. Writers who integrate all five of these APA guidelines into their writing will produce documents that are more powerfully convincing.

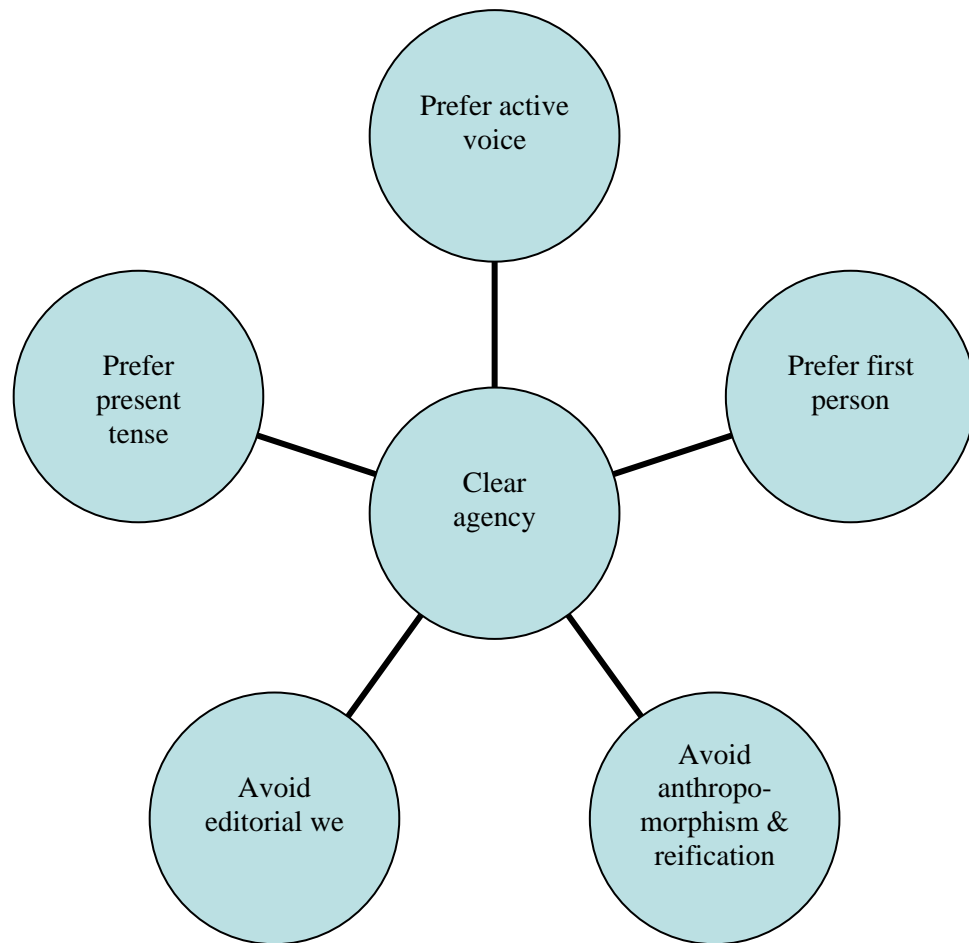


Figure 1. Radial diagram showing the relationships to the core element of agency.



The Concepts of Framing and Multiple Perspectives

The two concepts of framing and multiple perspectives help the writer escape the trap of presenting one particular frame or perspective as if it is the whole story. It is possible for an author to focus on only one frame or perspective, but with the explicit understanding and statement that there are other possible ways of viewing the situation. I describe these two concepts more fully in the following subsections.

Framing the way we view organizations.



Bolman and Deal (2003) use the term framing to describe a technique that encourages leaders to think and write with greater sensitivity to context by focusing their analysis on the structural (factories), human resources (families), political (jungles), and symbolic (theatres or temples) aspects of an organization. There are many possible frames for viewing organizations in addition to the four described by Bolman and Deal; for example, Morgan (1997) uses metaphors to illustrate the many ways of viewing organizational life.

A graduate-level paper can present only one frame, or several frames, for understanding what is happening in an organization. Readers are better able to follow the arguments if the writer takes care to identify and justify the use of a particular frame. The concept of framing is a way of avoiding a charge of bias against the writer. The writer explicitly states the frame or frames that he or she will use and explains the choice. A gender analysis of an organizational change initiative is not a limiting bias, but rather, a conscious choice of the writer to emphasize the gendered implications of the change. A writer can choose to focus in depth on a particular frame, such as the symbolic aspects of secondary school graduation ceremonies, or to provide multiple frames, such as including the economic and political implications of graduation ceremonies. The writer needs to decide and make clear for the readers the limitations set on the topic.

Multiple perspectives.

A broader and deeper description and analysis of a situation is possible when viewed from multiple perspectives. These perspectives can be those of various stakeholder groups, or constituencies. Traditional management texts present only one perspective, the managerial perspective. A person who considers a situation from multiple perspectives will take the time to consider how various constituencies, such as the students, support staff, parents, and teachers in schools, view the situation. Multiple perspectives can also include those external to the organization, such as neighbours, politicians, and business leaders. A writer who identifies his or her perspective and includes the perspectives of others demonstrates empathy and respect for individual human dignity. In addition to bringing an ethic of caring

to the writing process, a writer who uses multiple perspectives produces a more thoughtful, complete analysis of a situation, and is better able to evaluate the possibilities for improvement.

Careful attention to the details of APA style and to writing mechanics will produce a paper that readers can read without stumbling and therefore be better able to concentrate on the writer's arguments. The writer's arguments are more powerful when presented in a direct and honest style that presents the perspective of the author and remains open to the perspectives of others. Graduate students' writing benefits from integrating their theoretical understanding of people and organizations with technical mastery.


¹ The section in the APA manual providing guidelines to reduce bias may interest the reader (see p. 61).




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