Academic writing

Spoken & written language

INTRODUCTION: WHAT IS ACADEMIC ENGLISH?

The way we use language depends on factors such as the situation we are in (eg *at a friend's house, in a job interview, in a tutorial)*; who we are talking to (eg *friends, potential employer, tutor)*; and our means of communication (eg *conversation face to face, telephone, email, report)*. These factors influence:

- the amount of everyday language we use: e.g. compare *I think* to *it was decided*, or *the decision*
- how and to what degree we express our attitude and opinion: eg compare *the new treatment is excellent* to *the benefits of the treatment are* …
- how informal or formal our language is: eg compare *Are you selling that great little house*? to *the property will be sold*
- to what degree we include abstract and technical language: eg compare *we treat patients* to *the treatment of patients with deep-seated tumours*.

Our decisions about the way we use language are to a great extent unconscious ones: we instinctively know how to adapt our language to the situation. This is also the case when you write your assignments at university. For example, you will know it is best not to write something like this:

> *My mum's an accountant and she thinks you should buy shares in the communication industries.*

Instead, you would say something like this:

> *Some financial advisors recommend purchasing communication industry shares.*

While you may be aware of some requirements and features of academic English, others may cause confusion. How, for example, do you respond to assignment questions which ask **"What do you think"** when you know from your reading that academic language seems to contain little expression of opinion and attitude?

SPOKEN AND WRITTEN LANGUAGE: SOME IMPORTANT DIFFERENCES

WHAT ARE THE DIFFERENCES?

There are a number of differences between spoken and written language (Mewburn, Firth & Lehmann, 2019). For example, we can characterise spoken language as quite informal, colloquial and presumably unstructured (since it is often spontaneous). Furthermore, spoken language mostly takes place in the form of a dialogue with another speaker. Written language, on the other hand, is generally more structured, formal, impersonal and wordy. What's more, it typically forms a monologue rather than a dialogue. However these distinctions aren't necessarily so clear cut. Consider these lines below from an email to a friend.
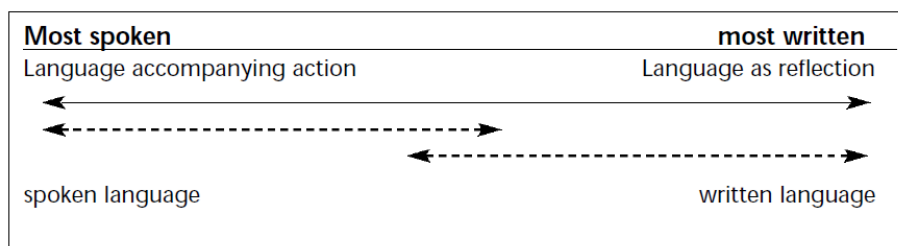
> *Hi Sarah*
>
> *Remember that adorable house I showed you when you were last here? Well guess what, it's for sale!*

Although it is in the written mode, the email starts off more like a dialogue (a question is asked of the reader). It is also quite informal (first name **Sarah**), and shows the writer's attitude (***that <u>adorable</u> house***). In other words, this example of writing seems more like spoken language. Similarly, here is an example of spoken language (at a house auction) which is more like written language:

> *Prospective bidders are required to register with the agent before the commencement of the auction.*

Here the language is formal, wordy (*commencement of the auction*), and impersonal (*prospective bidders*). This overlap between spoken and written language can best be understood when spoken and written language are viewed in terms of a continuum. In other words, there isn't a clear distinction between spoken and written forms, rather a gradual progression from the one form to the other. This continuum between spoken and written language can be shown diagrammatically.

Most spoken	most written
Language accompanying action	Language as reflection
spoken language	written language

At one end of the continuum we have the 'most spoken' language. This is language which accompanies an action. 'Most written' refers to language texts in which there is maximum distance between writer and reader, and the language no longer accompanies the action rather it reflects on it. The overlapping dotted lines in the diagram represent types of spoken language which are more written and types of written language which are more like spoken language. To understand the concepts of language accompanying action, and language reflecting on actions, study these examples below. The examples move from the most spoken forms of language (active), to the most written forms (reflective).The numbers of the examples correspond to the numbers on the continuum.

Language accompanying action						Language as reflection
most spoken						most written
1	2	3	4	5	6	7

1. Action only. Students protesting outside Parliament House.

2. What two students said to each other in the heat of the protest.
'Hey, Jack, here's a politician coming out now. Let's yell abuse.'

3. A politician watching the protest and telling the secretary what was happening.
'Well, there's a whole bunch of students down there, waving their banners around, looking really peeved, and can you believe it, they're asking for free education.'

4. A group of students reflecting on the day in the University Bar that evening.
"Man, you should have seen Carol when the police arrived. She was screamin' in their faces and shakin' her fists. When they arrested her, she was mad as a cut snake."

UNIVERSITY
OF WOLLONGONG
AUSTRALIA

Language accompanying action	Language as reflection

5. A report of the protest in the next day's newspaper.

Almost the entire front lawn of Parliament House was filled with angry students protesting against the increase in university fees on Thursday.'

6. An explanation (time unspecified) of why the protest took place.

Student rebellion against the Government's policy to increase student fees has its origins in Australia's social welfare history.

7. A work on socialist philosophy relating to free education.

While the socialist ideology values the concept of free education, contemporary western society appears to reject this ideology.

We can summarise the features of spoken and written language as follows:

SPOKEN	WRITTEN
context dependent	**context independent**
"Jack, here's a politician coming out now."	Almost the entire front lawn …
Here is a reference to something in the immediate context while now is also context bound.	_As the text is removed from the situation, all the information has to be supplied._
personal, informal, colloquial	**formal language**
"Let's yell"; mad as a cut snake; Carol; Jack	appears to reject this ideology
	objective (appears); specialist language
active	**passive**
when they arrested her	when she was arrested
clauses and conjunctions	**long noun phrases (nominal groups)**
She was screamin' in their faces <u>and</u> shakin' her fists. <u>When</u> they arrested her, she was mad as a cut snake.	<u>Student rebellion against the Government's policy to increase student fees</u> has <u>its origins in Australia's social welfare history</u>.
Conjunctions are joining words such as and, but, if, so, when	_Nouns are the people, places, or things in a text. The thing can either be a concrete one such as a book, or it can be an abstract concept such as the decision._
	Noun phrases are called nominal groups. They can make a text more difficult to understand (as the information is so condensed) and should be used with caution; however, they are a feature of academic writing

UNIVERSITY
OF WOLLONGONG
AUSTRALIA

WHERE DOES ACADEMIC WRITING FIT ON THE SPOKEN AND WRITTEN LANGUAGE CONTINUUM?

Academic writing is most like our examples six and seven:

> *Student rebellion against the Government's policy to increase students fees has its origins in Australia's social welfare history.*

and

> *While the socialist ideology values the concept of free education, contemporary western society appears to reject this ideology.*

In other words, academic writing is placed toward the 'most written' end of the continuum. However, some student writers use too many of the features of spoken language. Understanding what the features of spoken language are should help you to identify them if they occur in your own writing, and edit them appropriately, so that your writing is more consistently 'academic' in tone.

TASK1 IDENTIFYING FEATURES OF SPOKEN AND WRITTEN LANGUAGE

Read the following two paragraphs carefully, then answer the questions below:

Text A

People benefit from modern technology because it has improved our standard of living. Modern technology provides many good jobs and services for society, but it also damages the environment and causes environmental pollution. We know that modern technology damages the environment and causes pollution, so why do we still use it? Because we just can't live without it. Scientists are trying to reduce pollution and control the problems it causes, and if they don't, our environment will be destroyed. Modern technology is surely necessary and important, but how can we use it without causing negative effects?

Text B

The social benefits of modern technology include the increased provision of goods, services and employment. While this technology has many negative side-effects on the environment, particularly in terms of pollution, modern society is dependent on the benefits that this technology provides. In recent years, increasing public awareness of the extent of environmental destruction as a result of this technology has spurred scientific investigation into technologies which provide a more sustainable outcome for the environment. In this sense, modern society may continue to sustain itself and the environment through more sophisticated technology.

1. Which of the texts is more 'written' according to the concept of the spoken and written continuum? Text A or Text B?

2. Can you identify examples of the following language features in texts A and B? Write your responses in the space provided on the next page. (Note: you won't always be able to find examples for both texts).

SPOKEN	WRITTEN

Dialogue features such as questions:

Text A _____

Text B _____

Long noun phrases (nominal groups)

Text A _____

_____

Text B _____

_____

Personal (use of pronouns, mentions people)

Text A _____

Text B _____

Impersonal (indirect way of talking about people, e.g. Modern society)

Text A_ _____

_____

Text B _____

_____

Informal: everyday language

Text A _____

Text B _____

Formal: specialist language)

Text A _____

_____

Text B _____

_____

Informal: subjective (clear expression of opinion and attitude)

Text A _____

Text B _____

Formal: objective)

Text A _____

_____

Text B _____

_____

Lots of clauses and conjunctions

Text A _____

Text B _____

Nouns created from verb forms: eg *people benefit* (verb) and *social benefits* (noun)

Text A _____

_____

Text B _____

_____

Check the KEY at the end for suggested answers.

UNIVERSITY
OF WOLLONGONG
AUSTRALIA

TASK 2 MORE SPOKEN OR MORE WRITTEN?

Read the four texts below carefully, then rank them in terms of most spoken (1), to most written (4). Give brief reasons for your answers: for example

– subjective

– includes clear expressions of writer's opinion.

Language accompanying action			**Language as reflection**
most spoken			**most written**
1	2	3	4

(a) Why write essays?

In the modern world our thinking is largely transmitted by speech and through radio and television. At the university, however, you are required to do much of your thinking through writing. In the Humanities and Social Sciences you are inevitably required to produce a considerable number of essays.

Ranking _____ Briefly give your reasons:

_____

_____

(b) It might be said that in-vitro fertilisation, at any age, is a matter of free choice, especially if the patient pays. If a woman wants the procedure, age should be irrelevant. But age can never be totally irrelevant. The line is unclear. but in the case of older mothers, questions of the "best interest of the child" press more insistently. And even when the patient pays something towards the cost of these procedures, there is some cost to the public. The issue of resource allocation remains.

Ranking _____ Briefly give your reasons:

_____

_____

(c) In many radiotherapy centres where planning for external beam treatments is performed by radiation therapists, the treatment sheet and its calculations are independently checked by staff from a different educational background, typically a radiotherapy physicist. The benefits of this practice were evaluated in a radiotherapy department with two linear accelerators, one combined superficial-orthovoltage unit and one telecaesium unit.

Ranking _____ Briefly give your reasons:

_____

_____

(d) What on earth does this have to do with your topic?

Ranking _____ Briefly give your reasons:

_____

_____

Check the KEY at the end for suggested answers.

UNIVERSITY
OF WOLLONGONG
AUSTRALIA

KEY: SPOKEN AND WRITTEN LANGUAGE

1 IDENTIFYING FEATURES OF SPOKEN AND WRITTEN LANGUAGE

Text B is more 'written'.

SPOKEN	WRITTEN
Dialogue features such as questions:	**Long noun phrases (nominal groups)**
Text A: *…, so why do we still use it? …, but how can we still use it without causing negative effects?*	Text A: *modern technology* (occurs four times); *our standard of living; many, good jobs services for society; environmental pollution, negative effects*
incomplete sentence: more like speech	
Text B: –	Text B (eg): *the social benefits of modern technology; increased provision of goods, services and employment; many negative side-effects on the environment; the benefits that this technology provides; increasing public awareness of environmental destruction as a result of this technology*
Personal (use of pronouns, mentions people)	**Impersonal (indirect way of talking about people, eg Modern society)**
Text A: *people; our; we (4 times); scientists*	Text A: *society*
Text B: -	Text B: *modern society; increasing public awareness; scientific investigation*
Informal: everyday language	**Formal: specialist language**
Text A: *good jobs; we just can't live without it*	Text A: *modern technology; environmental pollution*
Text B: -	Text B (eg): *social benefits; provision of goods; increasing public awareness; scientific investigation into technologies; sustainable*
Informal: subjective (clear expression of opinion and attitude)	**Formal: objective (less obvious expression of opinion and attitude)**
Text A (eg): *good jobs; modern technology damages the environment; surely necessary*	Text A: *negative effects*
Text B: -	Text B (eg): *the social benefits; environmental destruction; a more sustainable outcome; modern society may continue …*
Lots of clauses and conjunctions	**Nouns created from verb forms: eg *people benefit* (verb) *and social benefits* (noun)**
Text A: *because, but, so, because, and, but*	Text A: *pollution (pollute); effects (effects)*
Text B: *while*	Text B: *benefits (benefit from); provision (provide); employment (employ); awareness (be aware); destruction (destroy); investigation (investigate)*

UNIVERSITY
OF WOLLONGONG
AUSTRALIA

2 MORE SPOKEN OR MORE WRITTEN? (SUGGESTED ANSWER)

Placing texts on the spoken and written continuum.

Language accompanying action			Language as reflection
most spoken			**most written**
1	2	3	4

Ranked 1

What on earth does this have to do with your topic?

contains pronoun form (your); informal language and opinion (What on earth); question form which is common in dialogues; and it is context dependent (we don't know what 'this' refers to)

> **source:** lecturer's comment on student's assignment

Ranked 2

Why write essays? In the modern world our thinking is largely transmitted by speech and through radio and television. At the university, however, you are required to do much of your thinking through writing. In the Humanities and Social Sciences you are inevitably required to produce a considerable number of essays.

some formal language and some features of spoken language such as direct address to the reader (you)

Ranked 3

It might be said that in-vitro fertilisation, at any age, is a matter of free choice, especially if the patient pays. If a woman wants the procedure, age should be irrelevant. But age can never be totally irrelevant. The line is unclear, but in the case of older mothers, questions of the "best interest of the child" press more insistently. And even when the patient pays something towards the cost of these procedures, there is some cost to the public. The issue of resource allocation remains.

features of formal language such as lack of personal pronouns and everyday language; specialist language such as in-vitro fertilisation; long noun phrases, some abstract nouns (allocation); however one feature of spoken language is the amount of conjunctions (if, but, and)

> **source:** editorial from *The Sydney Morning Herald*

Ranked 4

In many radiotherapy centres where planning for external beam treatments is performed by radiation therapists, the treatment sheet and its calculations are independently checked by staff from a different educational background, typically a radiotherapy physicist. The benefits of this practice were evaluated in a radiotherapy department with two linear accelerators, one combined superficial-orthovoltage unit and one telecaesium unit.

formal vocabulary(abstractions such as benefits); technical language; objective; long noun phrases

> **source:** abstract from physics journal

REFERENCES

Clanchy, J & Ballard, B (1981) *Essay Writing for Students*, Longman Cheshire, Melbourne.

Gerot, L & Wignell, P (1994) *Making Sense of Functional Grammar*, Tanya Stabler, Sydney.

Hammond, J (1992) *English for Social Purposes*, NCELTR, Macquarie University, Australia.

Mewburn, L, Firth, K & Lehmann, S (2019) *How to Fix Your Academic Writing Trouble: A Practical Guide*, Open University Press, London.

UNIVERSITY
OF WOLLONGONG
AUSTRALIA