

# Voice in Academic Writing

## What do we mean by ‘voice’ in academic writing?

Most university writing tasks require you to draw on a range of academic sources to support your claims, arguments and ideas. We use the term **academic voice** to talk about distinguishing between **your thoughts** and words, and those of **other authors**.

Example:

**The current diversity of the student population poses a great challenge to universities.** *A common approach to providing learning support is by extra-curricular study skills courses, often offered in dedicated learning support centres (Gamache, 2002; Haggis & Pouget, 2002). This approach is referred to as ‘bolt-on’ (Bennett et al., 2000) as opposed to the ‘built-in’ or embedded approach where learning is developed through the subject teaching.* Wingate (2006)

**KEY: Writer’s voice;** Other voices

## The importance of using a range of voices in academic writing

A common purpose of academic writing is to present a clear position and defend / support it. Your reader wants to see that you have a personal ‘voice’ on your subject and use it successfully to build an academic argument. To develop your position, you need evidence to support it. This is usually supplied by the voices of scholars in the field. You may also have to present concepts or evidence that does not support your position and show why you do not consider these to be useful or appropriate. In this process of interwoven voices, you need to clearly distinguish both your voice and the voices of your sources and identify each source appropriately.

## Direct and indirect voice in academic writing

Direct voice is either your own voice (*i.e.* your own ideas in your own words) or the direct ‘cut + paste’ voice of another thinker /writer.

If you are using someone else’s ideas, this usually takes the form of a **DIRECT QUOTATION**. These are often used to emphasise or strengthen a point you want to make. However, they should be used sparingly and not as a substitute for your own ideas written in your own writer’s voice.

Example (**Direct quotation**):

*In discussing the importance of teaching study skills, Jordan (1997: 8) comments that “study skills are not something acquired instinctively.”*

Notice that words taken directly from Jordan’s text are enclosed in “quotation marks”. This is essential whenever an author’s exact words are used. Note also the use of the reporting verb comments. The use of these verbs is common with direct quotations. For more information see the ASU publication ‘Connecting & Reporting’. **NOTE:** In general, quotations longer than 30 words should be indented from the margin.

Indirect voice is when you make a **SUMMARY** or **PARAPHRASE** of someone else’s ideas. These are often used to synthesise information or to make general points.

Example (**Paraphrase**):

*As students do not obtain study skills automatically, it is very important to teach them these skills (Jordan, 1997).*

Example (**Summary**):

*It is important to teach study skills to students (Jordan, 1997)*

## Paraphrasing

A paraphrase involves rewriting, or ‘translating’, someone else’s ideas into your own words in approximately the same number of words as the original text. The key to acceptable paraphrasing is being able to manipulate the language and grammatical features of the original so that you keep the meaning while making the words your own.

**Original text:** *With an understanding of the conceptualization and methods of application, QOL (Quality of Life) can be an important concept for occupational therapists to use in outcome measurement.*

**Paraphrase:** *Quality of Life has been described as an important outcome measure for occupational therapists, provided it is adequately conceptualized and the methods of applying it are understood (Liddle & McKenna, 2000).*

## Summarising

A summary includes the main ideas of an author or the essence of their argument/s and is always substantially shorter than the length of original text. Through summarising source material, you can avoid overusing direct quotations and paraphrasing large sections of the original text (a common issue for less confident writers). It forces you to focus on the meaning of what you have read and presents the material in your own words. You still need to acknowledge the source of the information, and you should add your own comments to provide analysis and interpretation of the work.

Example summary:

**Original text:** *With an understanding of the conceptualization and methods of application, QOL (Quality of Life) can be an important concept for occupational therapists to use in outcome measurement.*

**Summary:** *Quality of Life can be an important concept and outcome measure for occupational therapists (Liddle & McKenna, 2000).*

## Labelling voices

All 'other voices' in your written work need to be labelled / identified except for those written in your own writer's voice. The exceptions to this rule are ideas in your work which are considered 'common knowledge' such as dates and events acknowledged to be facts. If you do not label all 'extra' voices, your reader will think everything in your work belongs to you as the writer and you may be accused of plagiarism.

The way we label voices is discipline specific and is dependent on the referencing style used by the Faculty or School you are writing for. For more information see the ASU publication 'Referencing Essentials.'

## Expressing your own voice more confidently

There are several techniques to show your position in regard to a particular question / issue. These include:

**Showing how confident – or not – you are with regard to your position:** You can be cautious through the use of hedging language, such as *may*, *might* or *could*, OR you can be more confident through the use of such intensifying language as *certainly*, *definitely* or *must*.

Example:

*"The investigations to date **may** indicate a fundamental flaw in this approach. It **certainly** shows a need for more research on this topic . . ."*

**Being explicit about relationships:** You can show your position towards relationships discussed in your writing by commenting on the strength of these links. For example, you could replace the over-used 'according to' in your writing with a range of evaluative adjectives and adverbs that indicate what you think of other writers' views.

Example:

*"Peters is misguided when she **inaccurately** claims that students need . . ."*

**Indicating the strength of your claim:** You can show your position with regard to the points of view or evidence that you have presented by using a combination of precise verb usage, modality and other evaluative language.

Example:

*"Furthermore, **it appears that** Field **may have** overlooked some key data when he **raises the possibility** that . . ."*

## Use of 'other' voices – Final points to note

- Maintain your own voice in your writing and avoid the extended use of other voices. Overuse of external voices is usually seen as 'padding' by academics and indicates a lack of original thought by the writer.
- It is often inappropriate to attach a label referring to a source at the end of a long paragraph as the reader may be confused where your original writer's voice starts and finishes.
- Use a variety of voices in your writing but remember that it is your responsibility to take charge of managing these different voices and reference them correctly.

## Works Cited

Brick, J. (2009) *Academic writing: a student's guide to studying at university*. South Yarra, Vic: Macmillan

Wingate, U. (2006) Doing away with study skills. *Teaching in Higher Education*. 11(4) October, 457-469

## Further Resources

**Airport - Academic Interactive Resources Portal**  
<http://airport.unimelb.edu.au> Online academic skills development resources, including material on academic writing.

**Using English for Academic Purposes: A Guide for students in Higher Education**  
<http://www.uefap.com/writing/writfram.htm> The 'Functions' and 'Reporting' sections are particularly useful in relation to the concept of voice in writing.

## Academic Skills