

Clear and Academic Language

Chapter 12 from the book:
Lotte Rienecker and Peter Stray Jørgensen
with contributions by Signe Skov

The Good Paper - A Handbook for Writing Papers in Higher Education

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Samfundslitteratur
Rosenoerns Allé 9
DK-1970 Frederiksberg C
Denmark

slforlagene@samfundslitteratur.dk
www.samfundslitteratur.dk

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12. Clear and academic language

In higher education, the most important quality of a paper is its disciplinary content. However, there are good reasons for mastering good and academic language, as language expresses and co-creates content. With language you signal the professionalism you possess and develop as well as the professionalism and scientific standards of your papers and research. When asked to characterise good papers, most teachers mention language, and when BA and MA theses are assessed, spelling and formulation are taken into account as well (see examination regulations 2010, §24).

In this chapter the language of papers is considered from the following two perspectives. Language in an academic paper must be:

- Academic – not necessarily varied, beautiful or appealing
- Clear – not necessarily difficult.

Furthermore, an academic paper's language must be correct, i.e., it must abide by accepted conventions of spelling and punctuation. We will not treat correct language in this book, but in the bibliography you can find references to books, encyclopaedias and electronic resources which provide instructions on correct language.

Subject specific – and often supervisor specific – norms for good academic language are not treated in this book. Here we treat the general interdisciplinary language norms which are connected to the genre “the research text”. However, professional competence and written work are closely linked because research is expressed through language. Therefore it is crucial that students acquaint themselves with the specific language codes, traditions and norms of their field and the disciplinary discourse community of which they are part. You can do so by asking your supervisor about his/her quality criteria for language and by reading good papers and research texts from your field.

First of all: Language changes from think text to draft text to product text

In this chapter we describe the language of the finished paper ready to be handed in, i.e. the product text. It is an important point that the language requirements for the finished product text, which will be read by others, do not apply to the language used during the writing process in idea text and draft text. The purpose of language in the writing process is to produce content and support the thought process. If you focus on writing well-formulated and correct language from the start, you run the risk of getting bogged down. I.e., you should postpone any concerns about the finished paper's language until you start revising – after content and structure are in place.

Text to supervisor, project- or feedback group

In the writing process, however, it is important to distinguish between think text and draft text when sending text to your supervisor, project- or feedback group. In think text you use language as a tool for thinking. You brainstorm, develop ideas, write practice text, i.e. text to get you started, text that touches upon your topic, text that may not yet be focused on any particular points. You should not send this type of text to your supervisor or group for textual supervision and feedback. It will be difficult for your supervisor and fellow students to give you qualified feedback on loose, writer based text. Furthermore, being sent a text which is not aimed at a reader can be a frustrating experience as well as a source of irritation. However, if you present this form of text in e.g. mind maps, tables, overview models (e.g. the pentagon), it can be suitable for discussing ideas, thoughts, connections and possible content with your supervisor.

The text you send to your supervisor, your class or group for textual supervision and feedback should neither be think text nor product text but something in between, also known as draft text. This is text that has been through an initial phase of processing, but which is not yet fully worked out, and is in need of improvement in terms of language and content, which is where supervisor and fellow students can help. In draft text you demonstrate professional competence in your language through relatively cohesive reasoning leading to disciplinary points and by using field terms, concepts, definitions, etc., which prove central to the research. It is a good idea to inform your supervisor (and other readers) to which degree the text is edited, so the

receiver can focus on the important aspects. Also see the section about supervision in chapter 13. The following table shows which text types are best suited to different receivers and readers throughout the writing process.

Text	Sender	Receiver
Think text	Writer	Writer
Draft text	Writer	Supervisor Project group Feedback group
Product text	Writer	Supervisor/External examiner

The rest of this chapter is about the requirements for language in the finished paper, i.e. product language.

Clear and academic language

The first and most important thing about language that we tell students in higher (academic) education is that it must consider both research text conventions and disciplinary usefulness. Language is meant to render the paper's research and results credible in the disciplinary debate, i.e. it must be credible to peers so they can use and build on it.

In the name of research, papers must communicate information

- clearly, unambiguously and in a way that enables replication – the reader must understand what the researcher does, and the reader must be able to check up on the information
- objectively – the reader must be able to reach the same results following the same procedure
- cohesively – the reader must be able to follow the reasoning and argumentation
- economically and exhaustively – the reader should neither be disturbed by irrelevant information nor should information that could change the results be withheld.