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Chapter 1

What's different about academic communication?

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

When you have finished this chapter, you will be able to:

- explain what is meant by 'academic communication'
- describe the main features of academic communication
- explain why students need to understand what academic communication involves.

What is academic communication?

Here are two emails, one written to a family member and one to a business associate. Which is which and how do you know?

Hey Jean,

Shouldve written this days ago, but i guess its better late than never. Amazing trip so far. Brugge was just a really awesome place and Berlin was also amazing because of its history. Ive taken plenty of pics to show you all when i get back home.

See you soon

Love

Hugh

Hi Stephen,

I hope this email finds you well. I'm writing to enquire about progress on the marketing campaign. Are the brochures ready yet? Could you let me know their expected date of delivery?

Thanks.

Best regards,

Colin.

You probably realised that the first was written to a family member and the second to a business associate, but how did you know? Did you notice the informal tone of the first, which uses contractions (*shouldve* instead of *should have*) to make the email sound like speech, colloquial language (*I guess, awesome*) and non-standard capitalisation and punctuation (*I* is not capitalised and apostrophes are omitted from abbreviations, such as *its* rather than *it's* and *Ive* instead of *I've*). The language is also vague—*see you soon*, rather than setting a specific time.

The second email, in contrast, is more formal. It opens with a general pleasantry then tells the reader what the email is about. The language is not colloquial; it is polite, everyday language, and the grammar and punctuation are standard—*I* is capitalised and apostrophes are included, the writer using *I'm* rather than *Im*.

The difference between these two emails illustrates an important point: that the topic or purpose of a piece of writing and its audience, that is, the person or people it is aimed at determines the language that is used. Something else also needs to be considered; that is, the medium by which the message is being transmitted. Email? Twitter? Blog post? Phone—which means the message is spoken rather than written? Word-processed text? When you use any of these, the language you use changes. Just think about the change in language that using Twitter, with its limit of 280 characters, rather than an email involves.

Think about this

Imagine you are away on a skiing holiday.

- How will you communicate with your very elderly grandmother? What will you tell her about your holiday and what language will you use?
- How will you communicate with your friends back home? What will you tell them and what language will you use?
- Just before the end of your holiday, you broke your leg in a skiing accident and will be two weeks late in returning to work. How will you communicate with your boss? What language will you use?

So the language we use is determined by the purpose of the message, its audience and the medium it uses. This is especially so in the university. Academic communication refers to the way that lecturers, researchers and students, that is, people who work or study in universities, use language for different purposes with different audiences, using different mediums of transmission. However, academic communication does not refer only to the way that language is used. It also, and importantly, reflects the attitudes, values and ways of behaving that are shared by people who work or study in universities. In this book we will identify what these academic attitudes and values are and how they affect the ways in which students and lecturers communicate.

Why is academic communication important?

As a new university student, you probably expect to learn new knowledge and to develop new skills. But this is not all that you have to learn. You also have to learn to communicate in ways that reflect academic attitudes and understandings, because your lecturers will expect you to do so.

All students have to become familiar with the expectations of academic communication, no matter where they come from. The norms of academic communication may be unfamiliar to many students who have been educated in English-speaking education systems, just as they may be unfamiliar to students from India, Indonesia, Saudi Arabia and other countries.

WHAT ARE ENGLISH-SPEAKING UNIVERSITIES?

This book is about academic communication in English-speaking universities, but what are English-speaking universities? In countries as diverse as India, Germany, Japan and Oman, English is used as the language of instruction in at least some universities. However, while universities in many countries teach in English, they do not necessarily use language in the same way. In describing academic communication in English-speaking universities, this book is referring to universities in countries such as the UK, Ireland, Canada, Australia and the United States. This does not imply that universities in these countries are all the same, but it does suggest that they share a number of attitudes and values in common. These attitudes and values are expressed most clearly in the types of academic behaviour that are expected from scholars and students alike and the ways in which they use language depending on purpose, audience and medium of communication. This book attempts to describe some of these behaviours, to explore some of the attitudes and values that underpin them and to identify the ways in which these affect the language that is used.

Do all disciplines communicate in the same way?

Does a discipline like economics share the same attitudes and values as a discipline such as information technology? The answer is both 'yes' and 'no'! Some attitudes, values and behaviours are shared by all disciplines—from astronomy to zoology. Others relate to specific disciplines. For example, all disciplines expect you to be an independent and critical learner, and they generally agree on what 'independent' means. (You will find more about being an independent learner in Chapter 3.) However, different disciplines have different ideas about what being 'critical' involves. For example, in the natural sciences (physics, chemistry, biology and so on) and in the applied sciences—such as engineering and information technology—critical thinking often involves problem-solving. This means that you have to decide which theories and concepts are most appropriate to solve a problem, and then use them to solve it. On the other hand, in the social sciences—such as economics, business studies, psychology, sociology—you are more likely to compare and contrast different theories and concepts, and to evaluate their usefulness and applicability in specific situations.

Different disciplines ask different types of questions, and they may also vary in the methods that they use to answer those questions. The methods used to investigate questions in physics for example, are different from those used to answer questions in business studies or IT.

Another area of difference between disciplines lies in the types of text that you have to write. History students, for example, often have to write argumentative essays, while psychology students are more likely to write research reports. Students of biology and physics may have to work in groups to produce posters, while students in business studies—also working in groups—may produce reports.

Think about this

- What discipline or disciplines are you studying?
- If you are studying more than one discipline, are there any differences in the types of tasks you do for assessment?
- Compare the types of tasks you have to do with those of a friend enrolled in a different discipline.

What are academic attitudes and values?

In this section, we will identify some of the most important attitudes and values of academic communication by looking at an important debate in economics (see the example). It does not matter if you are not studying economics, because the attitudes and values that are illustrated are common to most disciplines.

EXAMPLE

Macroeconomics is the section of economics that asks questions such as:

- How can a country avoid unemployment?
- How can a country avoid inflation?
- Should governments try to regulate the economy?

There are two different approaches to answering these questions. Some economists believe in the free market. They think that if governments do not interfere in the economy, the free market will solve problems such as unemployment and inflation. Other economists believe that governments need to take active steps to reduce problems like unemployment and inflation. They do not believe that the free market alone is effective.

What can we learn from this example? The most important lesson is that there is usually more than one way to approach a problem. The economy is very complex, so different economists develop different answers to questions.

The same situation exists in other disciplines. For example, there are several different ways of explaining how children learn their native language. If you study management, you will find that there are many theories about how to motivate people, and students in the health sciences may argue about how to assist older patients most effectively or ways to cope with depressed patients.

The claim that there is more than one way to approach a problem is an important one because it illustrates one of the central ideas of academic communication: that is, that knowledge develops through debate and argument. Scholars compare and contrast different approaches to a problem, trying to see which describes the real world best or which is most useful. As you study different subjects, you will notice how scholars in each subject refer to their own ideas and to the ideas of other scholars, agreeing with some and disagreeing with others. Each scholar presents ideas that he or she thinks best explain the real world and criticises ideas that he or she does not agree with. As students, you are expected to learn how to take part in this continuing debate.

Now let's go back to the two different approaches in macroeconomics that were described in the example on the previous page. One approach is to leave everything to the operation of the free market; the other involves government interference. At different times, each of these approaches has been popular. In the 1920s, for example, most economists believed that governments should not interfere in the economy. However, as a result of the Great Depression of the

1930s, when millions of people were unemployed, the idea that governments needed to take action to create jobs became widely accepted. This approach was named *Keynesian* after John Maynard Keynes, the economist who developed the theory. It remained the dominant approach until the 1970s, when the idea that government regulation affected growth in a negative way became influential. This idea led to the approach that is usually called *monetarist*. One of the most important monetarists was Milton Friedman. Since the great financial crisis of 2008, Keynesian ideas are once again becoming popular.

The fact that one position is dominant does not mean that other positions do not exist. Economists are always developing ideas and theories that do not agree with the dominant ones. Even when Keynes's ideas were at their most influential, many economists continued to advance alternative views. Similarly, the influence of monetarist positions in the 1970s and 1980s did not mean that Keynesian approaches were abandoned by all economists.

Another point to note is that academics build on the work of other scholars. They do not develop their ideas in isolation. Friedman is a good example of this. While he agrees with the early twentieth-century economists, his ideas are not the same as theirs. His theories represent a major development of their position. More significantly, he developed his theories in debate with Keynes's ideas.

Think about this

Think about your own experience in education.

- Does this description of academic communication fit with your own previous experience of education in high school or in your own country?
- Does it match your expectations regarding university study?
- In what ways is it similar?
- In what ways is it different?

What are the features of an academic argument?

Now that we understand that knowledge develops through discussion and argument, we need to identify some of the features of academic argument. Let's start by looking at Texts 1 and 2. Both are about deforestation, but they are written in very different styles.

TEXT 1

DEFORESTATION

The most important cause of tropical deforestation is conversion of forested areas to subsistence agriculture, that is, agriculture which meets the daily needs of an individual family. This process often starts when a road is built into a remote area to improve transport of goods. The road opens previously inaccessible areas to logging. Once the loggers have finished, poor settlers move into the area and slash and burn the remaining forest. This completes the deforestation process which began with road building.

TEXT 2

LOGGING

Last year I went hiking in one of British Columbia's most beautiful national parks. I was horrified to see evidence of illegal logging again and again. Most shocking was to find the stump of a huge old cedar. The stump was three metres in circumference, and the tree must have been fully 50 meters tall and 800 years old. It had clearly been illegally removed without thought of negative effects on the surrounding environment.

Loss of such old trees will not only adversely affect the environment, but it also means that our children and grandchildren will be unable to experience the glory of our wilderness areas.

Globally, the value of timber illegally logged from wilderness areas is estimated at up to $100 billion. The exact value is very difficult to establish because timber is valued according to its market value, that is, by the number of boards that can be produced from it. The value of a growing tree constituting part of an ecology is not taken into account.

Given the extent of timber theft, there is a real danger that old-growth forests will have completely disappear in our lifetimes.

Logical, rational argument

The purpose of Text 1 is to explain why deforestation takes place, so its tone is logical, rational and impersonal. It is logical because it outlines a chain of cause and effect leading to deforestation. The reader can follow the chain of reasoning and check that each step is clearly related to the previous one. The argument is outlined for you in Figure 1.1.

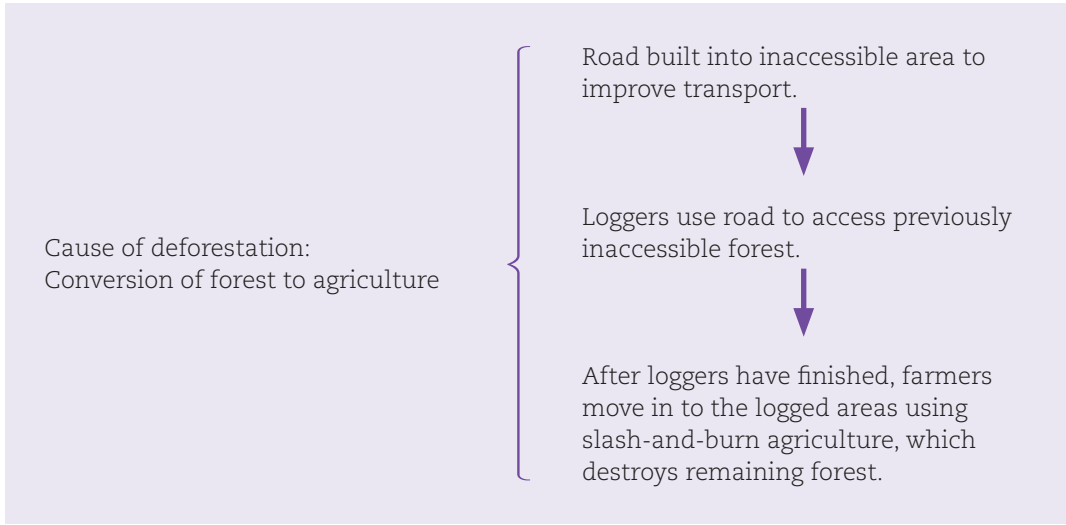

FIGURE 1.1 Argument in Text 1

The argument is rational because it depends on facts that can be observed and verified. As a reader you can look up the work of researchers interested in deforestation and see if they agree with the chain of steps indicated in the text.

The argument is also impersonal. (We will look at how to introduce the personal in Chapter 8.) This means both the writer's feelings and emotions are not relevant, and the writer does not put him or herself into the text. Instead, he or she bases the argument on evidence that can be checked and verified.

All this means that we as readers can argue with what the writer is claiming. Because the argument is logical, rational and impersonal, we can indicate sections of the argument that are problematic. For example, we could point out that when farmers move on to deforested land, they may use farming methods that not only do not involve slash-and-burn agriculture but also have economic benefits.

Now look at Text 2. The purpose of this text is to describe somebody's personal experience of logging and their feelings about it. The tone is therefore personal and subjective. The writer does not attempt to build a logical, rational argument. Instead he tells us directly and indirectly how he feels about logging. This does not mean that the text is irrational or illogical; however, the purpose of the text is not to present a logical, rational argument.

We can see this if we look at the second last paragraph:

> *Globally, the value of timber illegally logged from wilderness areas is estimated at up to $100 billion. The exact value is very difficult to establish because timber is valued according to its market value, that is, by the number of boards that can be produced from it. The value of a growing tree constituting part of an ecology is not taken into account.*

The writer indirectly indicates that a living tree constituting part of a wider ecology is more valuable than the timber produced from the logged tree. This may be so, but the writer supplies no evidence to support this position. The result is that it is difficult to argue with what the writer is saying. Even if we showed that some of the facts were wrong, this would not affect the argument, because the writer has a right to feel as he does. Text 2 is not an academic argument.

Verifiable claims and precise information

There are two more features of academic argument that we need to identify. These are that claims are supported by evidence and that the facts are as precise as possible. When writers do not have precise evidence, they indicate this by using qualifying words.

TEXT 3

The destruction of tropical forests will result in the mass extinction of species and a huge loss of biodiversity. Scientists estimate that there are between 5 million and 80 million species of plants and animals on Earth. Half of these are in tropical rainforests, which cover about 7% of the Earth's dry surface area. However, only about 1.5 million species have been named, and of these, few have been studied in depth.

Many plants and animals live in specialised habitats, making them very vulnerable to deforestation. Once their habitat is destroyed, they may find it difficult to adapt to a new one, and so become extinct. The exact rate of extinction is unknown, but scientists estimate that it may be as high as 137 species a day.

Text 3, also dealing with deforestation, describes its possible effects on biodiversity. In this text, the writer qualifies several facts and we learn, for example:

- Scientists estimate that there are between 5 million and 80 million species of plants and animals on Earth.

- Many plants and animals live in specialised habitats, making them very vulnerable to deforestation.
- Once their habitat is destroyed, they may find it difficult to adapt to a new one.

Notice how the underlined words qualify the claim that the writers are making. For example, rather than say that there are between 5 million and 80 million species on Earth, they give a range from 5 million to 80 million. This is because we do not know how many species there are—they have not been counted. Many scientists have estimated numbers, however, and those estimates range from a low of 5 million to a high of 80 million, as indicated by the writer.

The writer also does not say that all rainforest plants are found in specialised areas, nor does he or she say that if the habitat of rainforest species is destroyed, they will become extinct. In each case, the writer recognises that there may be exceptions. Some rainforest plants are found over large areas. Even if one habitat is destroyed, some animals may be able to adapt to a different one.

You can see that scholars are usually very careful about what they claim. They want to make sure that the evidence they have supports the conclusion they reach, so they qualify their claims in different ways. Here are some ways in which the sentence about the extinction of rainforest animals might be modified:

- If their habitat is destroyed, rainforest animals will become extinct.
- If their habitat is destroyed, rainforest animals may become extinct.
- If their habitat is destroyed, some rainforest animals may become extinct.
- If their habitat is destroyed, some rainforest animals may become extinct in some areas.

However, while it is important not to make claims that the evidence does not support, it is also important to be precise where possible. For example, we learn that tropical rainforests cover only 7 per cent of the total dry surface of the earth. The exact figure is known, and so it is used. Notice also that the dry surface of the earth is specified, rather than the total area of land and sea together.

Giving verifiable and precise information is an important feature of academic texts because it supports the development of knowledge through debate and discussion. If a scholar does not qualify his or her argument, others will criticise it. On the other hand, if scholars are not precise when it is possible to be so, their argument will also be criticised. We will examine how to make appropriate claims, and how to present precise arguments, in Chapter 15.

Over to You

Text 4 is another extract from an article on deforestation. What features tell you that this is an academic article?

TEXT 4

AFTER DEFORESTATION

Whether a forest regenerates after logging depends largely on the use to which the land is put after logging has finished. In tropical rainforests, almost all the nutrients are found in the plants and trees rather than in the soil, as is the case with forests in temperate areas. In deforested areas, tropical farmers typically come in and burn the remaining vegetation to release nutrients into the soil. However, when the rains come, they wash these nutrients away, leaving the soil much less

fertile. In as little as three years, the soil is depleted and is no longer capable of producing crops. This causes farmers to move on to find more fertile areas. The original land is left, allowing the rainforest to regrow. However, because the soil is not very fertile, re-growth will be slow. It may take up to 50 years to grow back.

Summary

1 Attitudes and values lead to ways of behaving.

2 Academic communication refers to the attitudes, values, ways of behaving and ways of using language that are shared by university staff.

3 New students have to learn new knowledge, new skills *and* new attitudes, values and ways of behaving and of using language. That is, they have to learn how to communicate appropriately in an academic environment.

4 Many features of academic communication are common to all disciplines, but each discipline also has its own expectations.

5 Academic knowledge develops through debate and argument.

6 There is usually more than one way to approach an academic issue or question.

7 Theories are refined and developed over time. More recent theories build on earlier theories and develop them.

8 Academic arguments are usually logical, rational and impersonal.
- They are logical, so the reader can see their reasoning.
- They are rational, so evidence for the argument is observable and verifiable.
- They are impersonal, so the argument is based on verifiable evidence and not on personal feeling.

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