PRINCIPLES AND CHARACTERISTICS OF ACADEMIC ENGLISH

These principles and characteristics are derived from two primary sources on writing for scholarly publication, *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association* (APA Manual), 7ᵗʰ edition, and *The Chicago Manual of Style* (CMOS), 16ᵗʰ edition, as well as from *English for Writing Research Papers* by Adrian Wallwork ("Wallwork 1") (Springer, 2016, 2ⁿᵈ ed.), and *English for Research: Grammar, Usage and Style* ("Wallwork 2") (Springer, 2016) as secondary sources. Comments are by the author of this material. While these sources address writing for published research papers, these principles and characteristics are also applicable to speaking in English for academic purposes and to other writing for academic and scholarly purposes. There is a companion to this article, "Common Issues in Academic English for Native Speakers of Russian", based on these sources and the author's work.

Note on terms: Academic English, scientific English, and scholarly English refer to the same thing, which in its written form is also called Standard Written English (CMOS p. 262 section 5.217).

Principles of Academic English (AE)

Precision and clarity. What you write can only be understood in one way—the one that you mean.
APA pp. 111–114

> Comment: In the Russian language there are a variety of tools to be clear—the many inflections of words according to case and gender, the system of prefixes and suffixes, the fixed rules for punctuation, and others—and they work even in very long sentences. English lacks most of these and is very dependent on the order of the words. So it's very important what word goes in which location in phrases and sentences, because each word controls or modifies others according to its placement. Therefore, sentences are generally shorter than sentences in Russian, because otherwise they become too long to control the intended meaning of the sentence. Word choices are more specific than in everyday English, and reference is clear. Ambiguity is not a value, clarity is.

Economy of expression. Use no more and no fewer syllables or words than needed to be clear and precise. "Say only what needs to be said"—but say it.
APA pp. 111–114

> Comment: The emphasis is not on formal politeness or impressing readers with one's erudition by the use of long words, but on communicating facts and ideas in a way that they may be clearly understood. Journals are always limited in space, and conferences have time limits; letters and emails have a short time to make an impression and hold someone's attention. So making something longer than it

needs to be is not useful and also detracts from the topic or purpose of the communication. However, because of the characteristics of English, a sentence may require a longer word or the addition of a few more words to make sure it is correctly understood.

Continuity in the presentation of ideas. "Readers will better understand your ideas if you aim for continuity in words, concepts, and thematic development from the opening statement to the conclusion […] punctuation marks contribute to continuity by showing relationships between ideas […][and] transitional words help maintain the flow of thought."
APA pp. 111–114

> Comment: Pronouns such as "this", "these" and others that refer to a noun in the previous sentence show the connection. Words such as "then", "therefore", "in addition" and many others can be used to link the ideas of one sentence to the next, and one paragraph to the next. However it is crucial that the referent is obvious (you may need to use a few more words: "This *characteristic* means that…").

Smoothness of expression. "Scientific prose and creative writing serve different purposes. Devices that are found in creative writing—for example setting up ambiguity; inserting the unexpected; omitting the expected; and suddenly shifting the topic, tense, or person—can confuse or disturb readers of scientific prose. Therefore, try to avoid these devices and aim for clear and logical communication" that avoids "omissions, irrelevancies, and abruptness" as well.
APA pp. 111–114

> Comment: In academic writing and speaking, it is crucial to define your key terms and then use *those* terms consistently. Using synonyms to vary the language can leave readers uncertain of what is being referred to. Using transition words and being careful about changes of verb tense are also helpful in creating overall smoothness, as is avoiding long, tangled sentences. The goal is that educated readers can read each sentence and know your basic meaning without having to "untangle" it, that is, to "fight" with it and not be able to continue reading or listening until solving the puzzle.

Use of an impersonal tone. "Although scientific writing differs in form from literary writing, it need not lack style or be dull. In describing your research, present the ideas and findings directly but aim for an interesting and compelling style and a tone that reflects your involvement in the problem."
APA pp. 115–116

> Comment: Scholarly English mainly describes things, processes, and events, so it is impersonal in tone, rather neutral. Words that denote emotions or judgments rather than facts and analysis are not used, even if they are positive (esteemed, well-known, experts). Differences of opinion between scholars are fine, in fact

expected, but they are presented in a professional way ("The researchers did not address this aspect," not, *The researchers completely overlooked this aspect* (APA p. 115). *When people are discussed, only what is relevant to the topic is described.* These things do not mean that you can't call something "interesting", "exciting", "unexpected" in a context where it will make sense to the reader or listener at an important point in your communication.

Reduction of bias. First of all, details about people are given only if they are relevant to the topic being discussed (APA p. 132). Then, it is key to avoid inaccuracies that reflect bias or stereotypes. For example, it is not acceptable to refer to all humans as "mankind", "man" or "he" ("The rights of a man", "We should recognize each person and his human rights"). APA now recognizes as correct the use of "they" and "their" for a generic person, and "individual", "person", "people". ("Every person and their human rights.") (APA pp 132, 140). It is necessary to avoid other types of biased language in speaking about people and historical events, for example, about racial, ethnic and religious groups, age, disability, and sexual orientation, while not ignoring relevant differences. The general principle is "people first": say "people with disabilities" instead of "disabled people", for example. *There is no large list of banned words, but editors, conference organizers and others will be aware of and reject an item or require changes of biased (some call it "discriminatory") language.* If you are informed and thoughtful about how you write and speak about people, while keeping in mind the principle of only describing what is relevant to the topic, your language will avoid the impression of bias, and you will not give the impression of being dated.
APA p. 114, p. 121, and Chapter 5, CMOS pp. 301–304 sections 5.221–5.230, <u>and</u>
https://www.apa.org/about/apa/equity-diversity-inclusion/language-guidelines.pdf

Care in the use of others' work. Much academic work involves quoting other people directly, or paraphrasing the work, ideas, or communications of others. Any direct quotations of others' words, phrases, or sentences are to be absolutely accurate, that is, exactly as they were written or spoken, in their original language, and they are cited fully. In paraphrasing the unique work, ideas, and statements of others, language should be accurate and fair but it must not be too close to the original author's words and construction; it should be in the words of the author who is paraphrasing, and then the source must still be cited or acknowledged.
APA pp. 253–256, Wallwork 1 pp. 185–196

> Comment: Language can make a challenge for nonnative speakers of English to find quotations that are completely "fit" the point being made. Paraphrasing others, which is done in many contexts besides writing articles, can be even more challenging. *Another challenge is that anything this is quoted and cited or paraphrased is to have been read or listened to in full, not only one part of an article, document, letter, or presentation; and anything quoted directly must be in the original language, not translated. Material from works read in translation must be paraphrased, not quoted.* (Chicago 13.79)

Focus on the audience. It is crucial to determine, and let your language and writing reflect, the audience you are communicating to and their reason for reading or listening to what you are going to say: the things they would already be expected to know about the topic, and what you should include so that they are not left out of something important and your idea is clear—what they will understand even if they are not as involved in your specific topic as you are—what you hope to accomplish—and what might confuse or offend them. In general, your tone is that of speaking to respected colleagues, and avoiding language and content that seems to talk up or down to them, while showing professional respect and in some cases a little deference.
APA p. 115, Wallwork 1 p. 5

> Comment: Your audience is not only native speakers of English. Nowadays there is the additional challenge of many in your audience being nonnative speakers of English, so it can be especially important to be clear, and to be polite without being overly formal. Journal editors, peer reviewers, conference organizers, and colleagues in international university collaborations may well also be nonnative speakers who strive for high standards of English in their work.

Use of organization and structure. Journal articles written in English always use a structure of section headings (APA p. 47 and examples) and both these articles and other documents, including letters, often use forms of seriation: numbered and bullet points (APA pp. 189–190) and other forms of organizing the contents with headings and subheadings. Oral presentations are often organized similarly, forming a "road map" that leads in one direction from the introduction to the conclusion.
See also Wallwork 1 p. 9 and Part II.

Other comments:

Consistency. The style guides (APA, CMOS and others) offer correct ways of doing the various things that are involved in academic English, for example, using punctuation, determining whether something is one word or two or has a hyphen, expressing numbers and dates, and much, much more. With practice, the guides are not difficult to use because they are well organized and usually have short, clear examples. Close attention to spelling and the use of a recommended dictionary (see below) are also key in written work, in addition to using computer spell-check (although it is not sufficient by itself) and other Word tools. In oral work, using the correct pronunciation of key words consistently is key, and using the correct pronunciation and inflection of all words and combinations of words. If these mechanics of your communication are done in a consistent way, along with your using the key terms consistently and correctly, you have the foundation of being as clear as possible.

Also, your carefulness will give others a good impression of the carefulness and accuracy of your research work and thoughtfulness of your ideas. This is a key reason for making the effort involved in this.

No one can know everything and no one expects you to—what matters is that you, as an academic, use sources and tools to get the right outcome!

British vs. American. Choice of words and phrases, spelling, punctuation and much else varies between British and American English (and English as used in English-speaking countries, though that tends to be based on the British). In Tomsk, as in many places in the world, there is a tradition of British English but with perhaps an increasing mixture of American. The sources and orientation of this course are American. Based on what I have observed to date, three recommendations for decision making in your work are:

1. If you are writing for a specific journal, make sure of which version of English it requires and follow it, consistently, making sure to use an appropriate style guide.
2. If what you are doing is not required to be in one or the other type of English, then consciously choose one type and use it consistently (rather than spelling the same word in different ways throughout, for example).
3. Be aware of the words and idiomatic expressions that may be understandable only to speakers of one or the other type of English, or may be misunderstood, and try to avoid them or explain them in context, because in general you have an international audience.

   See: CMOS use index/search feature for "British style". See also Wallwork 2 pp. 229–232, lists of differences by type of word and spelling. The recommended style manual for British English is *New Oxford Style Manual* (2nd ed., Oxford University Press, 2012).

Dictionaries. APA and CMOS both recommend *Merriam–Webster Dictionary* at www.merriam-webster.com. It contains examples of usage, and audio pronunciation of all words. But, "The dictionary merely describes how speakers of English use the language:…[they do not attempt to] guide writers on the thorny points [of the best usage]."
CMOS p. 262 section 5.217

See "Glossary of Problematic Words and Phrases" (same page, section 5.220 CMOS). This is a valuable long list of the best usage of some words and phrases, with an explanation for each and usually an example (e.g., ability – capability – capacity, about – approximately, affect – effect, begging the question, connote – denote, onto – on to – on, predominant – predominate, that – which, and many more!).

Characteristics of AE

1. **More formal.** There are words that are perfectly fine in everyday English that are not used in AE, including most two-word (phrasal) verbs such as: have to = must, go back = return, get up = arise, put down = suppress, look over = review, carry out = perform (research), and hundreds more. Words such as "a lot" (=many), "really" (= very) are not used, and terms such as "practically all" or "very few" that may be interpreted differently by different people are also not used.

APA p. 116, Wallwork 2 p. 138

2. **No colloquial expressions (including idioms)**; no jargon (overspecialized terms and euphemisms), ambiguous or illogical comparisons, mixed metaphors ("one branch of a growing body of knowledge"), anthropomorphism (an experiment cannot attempt to demonstrate something, only the researchers can, a theory cannot conclude).
APA pp. 116–117, see more examples

3. **Contractions are not normally used in writing for publication or formal speaking**. In formal writing or speaking, this may depend on the field and the journal or other document. Contractions can sound more natural if they are allowed, especially in speaking. But in writing it's usually "we are" instead of "we're", "do not" instead of "don't", "cannot" instead of "can't". Those that are awkward (I'd've) (should've) or unclear (there's) are avoided.
APA p. 116, CMOS 5.103 p. 232, Wallwork 2 p. 138

4. **Terminology is used correctly and consistently.** The correct, standard terminology for the field and topic are used. Key terms are defined clearly and used consistently. Also, the field may determine the standard way to express something that is different from that in another field (for example, "in" is "at" referring to a concept in philosophy).
APA p. 115, Wallwork 2 p. 142

5. **Wordiness avoided.**
at the present time = now, *after that* = then
due to the fact that = because
there were several students who completed = several students completed
X showed better performance than Y = X performed better than Y
the installation of the system is done automatically = the system is installed automatically
We have to point out that/it must be emphasized that = note that
APA pp. 114–115, Wallwork 1 pp. 82–87
These can usually be eliminated:
in the process of
in conditions of
in the development of
with the help of
in order to
from the point of view of
in terms of
in the course of
in (the) case of
in its turn
(and others)

6. **Redundancy avoided.**
they were *both* alike
a total of 68 participants

four *different* groups
exactly the same
absolutely essential
has been *previously* found
period of time
summarize *briefly*
APA pp. 114–115, Wallwork 1 pp. 82–87 and 148, Wallwork 2 p. 134
"Upon completion of the program, graduates are prepared for…" = "Graduates of the program are prepared to…"
"The preparation of the program will be carried out by TSU" = "The program will be prepared by TSU" or "TSU will prepare the program".

7. **No long noun strings.** English lacks the case endings to use a series of nouns/ participles/adjectives, adverbs and have it be meaningful; breaking it down usually involves the use of prepositions and articles.
preliminary online collegiate instructional methods survey results (no)
but: preliminary results of an online survey of collegiate instructional methods
 (APA p. 114)
art state technology (no) = state-of-the-art technology, and
mass destruction weapons (no) = weapons of mass destruction
but still: software program, aluminum tube, research technique (Wallwork 1 p. 30)
(Note that "research" is a noun, a verb, and an adjective in English!)

8. **Flexible but consistent punctuation.** Punctuation in English is more flexible than in some other languages, but is key to meaning as well as to flow of the information or ideas. Being consistent in a given use of punctuation is essential (for example, the use or not of the Oxford comma after the final item of a series—A, B, and C or A, B and C).
See APA pp. 153–164, CMOS Chapter 6, and Wallwork 2 pp. 209–210 for full detail.
A woman without her man is nothing.
A woman, without her man, is nothing.
A woman: without her, man is nothing.

9. **Capitalization of proper nouns.** *All proper nouns are capitalized, including all the major words of a title.*
APA p. 165–170, CMOS use the index for "capitalization", Wallwork 2 pp. 201–205.
the Department of Biology, Division of Genetics
the novel *Down and Out in Paris and London* by George Orwell
the international conference Multifunctional Chemical Materials and Technology

10. **Parallel construction.** When items are linked together in a series, each one must be a functional match of the others (word, phrase, sentence) and have the same grammatical function in the sentence (noun, verb, adjective, etc.). This is a major feature of academic writing. It also applies to any lists that are made in writing (such as bullet points or numbered items).

Example: My duties included; 1) coordinating fundraising, 2) developing donor lists, and 3) supervising staff (not, *to supervise staff).*
Example: The president of the university is a former professor, dean, and two-term judge (not, *The president of the university is a former professor, dean, and served two terms as a judge.*)(it would need to be…"is a former professor <u>and</u> dean, and served two terms…"

When using both…and, either…or, not only…but also, and other coordinating conjunctions used in pairs, the first conjunction is placed just before the first parallelism.
Example: The names were difficult both to pronounce and to spell (not*, The names were both difficult to pronounce and spell.)*
Example: It is surprising not only that paper-and-pencil scores predicted this result but also that all other predictors were less accurate.
APA p. 124–125, CMOS pp. 261–262, section 5.216
and CMOS p. 259–261, sections 5.212–5.215

11. **Verbs used more than nouns (therefore fewer abstract nouns).** Verb vocabulary is important as verbs tend to have fairly specific meanings and connotations. "Verbs are vigorous, direct communicators. Prefer the active rather than the passive voice, and select tense or mood carefully. The verb always agrees in number with its subject, regardless of intervening phrases."
APA pp. 117–120, CMOS p. 229, section 5.95 and onward
As in many other languages, verbs may be transitive, intransitive, or both, and the writer must know if a verb requires a direct object ("I told…[*someone/something]*" vs. "We stopped")*.*

Also, collocations are key, and usually involve a preposition or choice of prepositions. See CMOS pp. 252–254 section 5.191, List of words and the prepositions construed with them (it covers verbs, nouns, and adjectives). See also Wallwork 2 pp. 237–246, a lengthy list of noun, verb, and adjective collocations with prepositions.

12. **Sentence structure: noun, verb, direct object, indirect object.** This structure can be built on, but you must stop before you lose control of the meaning of the sentence or the reader's or listener's attention. *But a full sentence is not used for a subordinate detail* that should be built into a sentence that focuses on what is important and serves the flow of ideas.

Example: The researchers brought the books to the library, which is located on the east side of campus, and then […]. (not, *The researchers brought the books to the library. The library is located on the east side of campus. Then they […].)*
Example: "The largest Facebook group was XY, with 1,712 members." (not, *The largest Facebook group was XY. This group has 1,712 members.)*

For the same reason, the most important things tend to be at the beginning of the sentence, and in general readers do not have to wait until the end of the sentence to know the actor and the action.
APA p. 123, Wallwork 1 pp. 19–31, Wallwork 2 pp. 147–168

13. **Paragraph structure.** The most important things are at the beginning of the paragraph. As with a sentence, the reader should not have to wait until the end to "get" what it is about.
1. A topic sentence that tells the reader what the paragraph is about and in some way connects with the previous paragraph.
2. From one to eight [additional] sentences in a logical sequence that develop the topic.
3. A concluding sentence, possibly referring back to the first sentence or forward to the next paragraph.
Wallwork 1, all of 3

Next, see "Most Common Issues in Academic English" (for native speakers of Russian).