

Transitioning from Military Writing to Academic Writing

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Transitioning from Military Writing to Academic Writing

No matter what is being written, whether it be an email, letter, field report, essay, article, novel, etcetera, there is always the same emphasis on grammar and clarity. Good writing is clean writing, is clear writing. Regardless of who or what you are writing for, those elements should always be front and center.

There are other qualities of a paper or writing project that are entirely dictated by what is being written. The easiest way to think of it is this; every type of writing or piece of writing fits into a genre, a category that has its own unique qualities regarding goal, audience, voice, and format. Depending on the genre you are writing in, those characteristics should shift accordingly.

There is always a transition for writers when they are switching genres, whether it is a horror novelist who has decided to start writing historical fiction, or a veteran taking their first college classes; the way they write may not change on an elementary level, but how they approach their composition most definitely will.

For active or veteran members of the military, transitioning to college courses comes with its own set of obstacles. Perhaps the most striking and most difficult to get around is the transition from military writing to academic writing. Now, there are a vast variety of military styles across the branches, each with their own special qualities, but for the sake of brevity, they will be grouped together when comparing them with qualities of academic writing, which in turn has its own set of genres and fields. The important thing to keep in mind, is that most of the tools from military writing can be readily applied to academic papers, they just need to be focused in a different way. The big items to keep in mind regarding differences between the two writing styles are the goal of the composition, the audience of the composition, and the style or voice of the piece.



Goal / Audience / Voice

Academic Writing

- Goal: Make your readers think
- Audience: Specialized/ Critical readers in field of study to create/add to conversation
- Voice: Active

Military Writing

- Goal: Make your readers act
- Audience: Readers looking for relevant information related to mission at hand in order to get quick results
- Voice: Passive
(Walden University 2015)

Goal

Academic

- Contribute to conversation on topic/field
- Make readers think critically
- Persuade on an argument

Military

- Make readers act
- Clear and concise
- Goal oriented, focused on achievable results as opposed to conversation oriented
(Walden University 2015)

The goal or objective of a piece of writing is where it all starts. Before sitting down to write anything, a goal or purpose must be clearly kept in mind before doing so. Now, while the goal's specifics are always unique, the overreaching goal for all academic papers is the same, just as the overreaching goal for most military writing is the same. In the case of academic papers, it is all about making your reader think. Your paper should encourage the reader to think critically and ask questions of the material, which can lead to greater insights about the topic.



When it comes to military writing, the writing is meant to invoke action in some way. Since time is always of the essence when it comes to military operations, the writing is not meant to evoke thought or develop a conversation, instead, it is meant to relay the most crucial facts and data regarding an operation.

Audience

Academic

- Specialized reader
- Critical reader
- Will most likely be comparing your work with existing material on subject

Military

- Looking for practical information related to current mission
- Looking for relevant information to act knowingly
- About action, not questions
(Walden University 2015)

This leads us to audience. Who we are writing to dictates how we are relaying the information. As was mentioned above about time, this also plays a key role in how we write to our perspective audiences. When it comes to academic writing, time is not nearly as important as it is to military writing. Since there is not usually an action-oriented goal related to academic writing, the timetable or urgency is irrelevant. Instead, our audience has time and is using it to better understand a topic, to think about said topic, and to analyze/interpret/evaluate our work. Whenever an academic paper is written, it is adding to the larger conversation that the topic belongs to, and it is because of our audience that the paper is meant to work in such a way. The audience for military writing is drastically different. The audience is intimately involved in the process, in the sense they most likely will already have detailed knowledge about the material they are reading. Here, while the reader may be learning new data as they go, the reason they are reading is how that audience differs compared to writing for an academic audience; the writing should provide the data to inform on an actionable level. The time to think is far greater and easier to find for the academic reader than the military reader. As one can expect, these audience differences have a great effect on the voice/style of the writing involved.



Just as in daily conversation, we adjust our voice depending on who we are speaking or writing to. For instance, the way you talk to a superior at work will most likely be quite different than speaking with a best friend or significant other. How we present our ideas, feelings, opinions, will shift based on our audience. This is where the biggest and most obvious shift between military writing and academic writing can be found, voice. Academic writing should have what is called active voice, while military writing usually sticks with more of a passive voice. To put it simply, active voice means the subject in a sentence is performing the action of the sentence i.e., the soldiers destroyed the bridge. Passive voice is the reverse, meaning the subject is instead being acted upon by the verb i.e., the bridge was destroyed by the soldiers (Walden University 2015). Active voice usually denotes a strong, clear, and declarative style. Passive voice usually is attributed with less ownership (for good reasoning, considering most of the writing in military writing is multi-authored, and so having a distinct voice or style would be disorienting while reading an entire report or briefing since the material involved comes from different groups).

Voice / Style

Academic

- Active voice
- Voice distinct to writer
- More ownership
- Thesis driven
- Source usage is to back up thesis/argument
- Always paragraphs opposed to lists

Military

- Passive Voice
- Uniform voice
- Concise as possible with a focus on outcomes and action
- Bottom line up front
- Lists prevalent/accepted
(Walden University 2015)

The most complex of the above qualities is voice, as it is the most nuanced with the most moving pieces. While the goal and reader differences between academic and military writing are fairly clear, voice and style require a bit of a more detailed look. The box above offers a brief glimpse at the differences. Passive voice and active voice have already been covered.

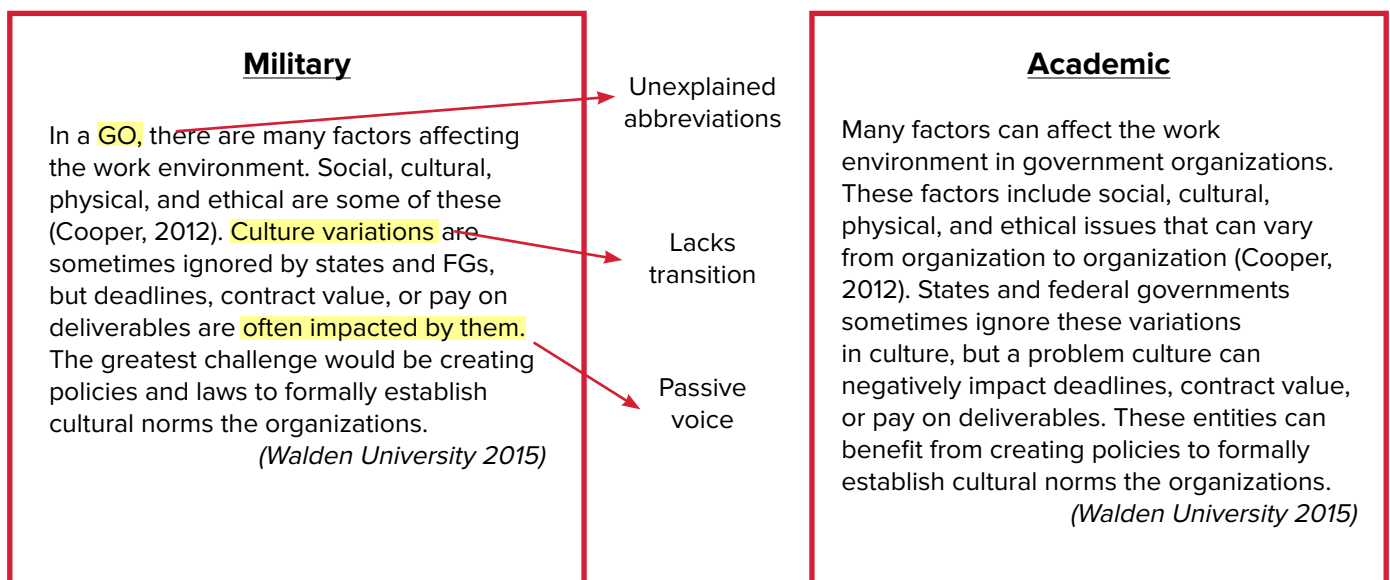
Uniform voice is important for military writing, for the same reason passive voice is used. Since a report is often multi-authored, a uniform style helps reduce confusion when reports are compiled together, limiting any hiccups that come with suddenly shifting into a different author's point-of-view and style. Academic writing encourages distinct voices. While the field one is writing in requires certain style characteristics unique to that field (i.e., writing a science article will have a different style than writing a business article as each require their own format, etiquette, and approach), writing in the academic field requires the voice of the author to stand out amongst others in their field. Though ideas are crucial, a distinct voice is what helps those ideas reach the right ears.



An academic paper is **thesis driven** (see the SDI Writing Center's Guide on Writing a Sound Academic Paper for more details about the thesis). The thesis is the heart of the paper, and it is through exploring the paper, that the thesis is supported, argued, and given to the reader in pieces until the conclusion, where it come full circle. While the thesis is given away in the introduction, its conclusion and supporting pieces are not given out so quickly. This is a bit opposite of military writing where the bottom line is up front. Since time is of the essence with military writing, and it is not about creating thought, but is about creating action, it is crucial to have that information front and center at the start (Walden University 2015). It is like leading with a conclusion. This method is not as effective in academic writing, as we should not be telling our audience the answers so readily, but instead we should lead them to think and develop an evaluation on their own. To lead with the answers in an academic paper would defeat the purpose of the academic paper; do not tell your reader what to think, your writing and paper should instead encourage them to think.

Source usage in academic papers is to support the thesis. As arguments appear in most theses, even those that are explanatory, there needs to be other materials or evidence to help back up our main ideas. In military writing, sources are usually reference points and are not there to provide evidence for an argument. With academic writing, the thesis is only as strong as the sources used to support it, so it is crucial that reliable and authoritative sources are found to help provide ample help in holding that thesis up.

Since time is one of the most important factors in the military, anything that speeds up the chain of information is usually accepted. This can be seen in lists being used. In academic writing, lists want to be steered away from completely. Instead, paragraphs should almost always be employed in place of lists. While lists do transfer information faster, they lack the flow, style, and transitional approach that paragraphs allow.





Structure: Example of Academic vs. Military Writing

Structure

Academic

- Full-fledged paragraphs
- Transitions
- Introduction and conclusion
- More active voice, i.e. ownership
- Sentence rhythm/variation (mixing of long, short, and medium sentence length)

Military

- Lists are common
- Focus more on facts/data than construction of writing
- Abrupt; again, just facts, no need for smoothing transition Passive voice
(Walden University 2015)

Above are side-by-side representations of how military writing can transition to academic writing. We can see in the military paragraph, abbreviations are used without explanation, there are no transitions, and passive voice is being employed. Now, these are not flaws, they are just qualities that are not wanted in academic writing. When translating or transitioning that military piece into academic writing, the abbreviation is removed, a clear transition and opening is placed in, and active voice takes the place of passive voice. This is just a brief example covering some qualities of voice and structure that separate the two writing styles.

Below are two more examples of military writing and academic writing. The major changes to translate the military piece into a more academic structure will be bolded

Military

Leaders must be mindful of the organization's goals, missions, and strategies. Leaders must be willing to utilize all available resources to the successful achievement of those goals. There is no one leadership style or theory that is the fit for all types of organizations and the challenges that they face. Theories have their own focus as well as strengths and weaknesses. Four leadership theories that are popular in business and academia today are:

- Transformational
- Team
- Complexity
- Situational leadership theories

(Walden University 2015)

Clear
hook/intro
sentence

Transitions

Thesis as
opposed
to list

Academic

In order for an organization to remain fit and competitive in today's increasingly global market, leaders must be mindful of the organization's goals, mission, and strategies. **Additionally**, leaders must be willing to utilize all available resources to the successful achievement of those goals (Johnson et al, 2014). There is no one leadership style or theory that is the fit for all types of organizations and the challenges that they face; **however each theory** has its own focus as well as strengths and weaknesses. Four leadership theories that are popular in business and academia today **are transformational, team, complexity, and situational leadership theories.**

(Walden University 2015)



Too Long, Didn't Read

For some quick and easy tips / reminders when transitioning from a military writing style to an academic style, keep these qualities in mind:

- Use an active voice, not a passive voice; own your theories and ideas.
- Include transitions to open, close, and move between ideas.
- Vary your sentence lengths; include a mix of long, medium, and short sentences.
- Your paper should be thesis-driven = don't start with the answers, lead the reader to them.
- Make your readers think as opposed to act.
- Steer clear of lists and instead use paragraphs to get your point across and organize your content.
- The writing should have a distinct voice. Allow yourself to be in the paper from time to time (use the "I" but use it sparingly).
- Use sources / resources to support your thesis.
- Your audience dictates everything, so always keep them in mind.

Bibliography

Walden University. *Academic Writing for Military Students*. Webinar Transcripts. August 26, 2015. <https://academicguides.waldenu.edu/c.php?g=465763&p=5832567>.