

Academic vs. Technical and Business Writing

Lesson 1 Notes

In Composition I, you learned about academic writing. In Technical and Business Writing, you will focus instead on professional writing. This means you will learn how to leverage your rhetorical tools in new ways, focusing on reimagining their use for workplace and public applications. Differences in audience, purpose, genre, design, delivery, and style are all important to consider.

The most essential difference between academic and professional writing is audience, as it is this difference that drives all others. When you write for an academic audience, you are writing primarily for yourself, your instructor, and your classmates. When you write for a professional audience, you are writing for various professional and public audiences that include coworkers, supervisors, customers, clients, and the general population. You are moving from writing in a writer-centered way to writing in a reader-centered way.

As your audience differs, so does your purpose. In academic writing, you focus on producing writer-centered documents that demonstrate the achievement of your course goals and objectives, which are often to learn or to analyze. In professional writing, you focus on producing reader-centered documents designed primarily to communicate, to deliver a message the users of those documents need to make a decision or to take an action. In some cases, that decision may be whether to interview or hire you, to purchase a product or service, to make an operational change, or to follow instructions.

Another element that differs is genre, or general category. When you think of genre, you may think of music (pop, rock, R&B, country, etc.) or film/literature (fiction, nonfiction, horror, romance, sci-fi, etc.). Each of these genres has certain conventions – characteristics, forms, styles, and subjects. For further examples of genres and conventions, check out [these cartoons](#) by John Atkinson. This idea of genre applies to writing as well. Instead of writing in the genre of academic essays, you will write in professional genres that include resumes, cover letters, emails, proposals, reports, instructions, infographics, presentations, and other professional and technical documents.

In tandem with genre comes design. In academic genres such as essays, your reader may read through many identically formatted pages of paragraph after paragraph. In professional genres, multiple audiences may read your work for assorted reasons. These audiences have different knowledge levels, reading levels, interest in your work, and time to engage with it. So, you need to ensure that the information each audience needs is easy for them to find quickly. You will do this through the use of basic design principles and elements like headings, bulleted and numbered lists, different fonts, and graphics.

One other consideration is delivery. In academic settings, you usually submit work through learning management systems like Blackboard or Canvas. In professional and technical settings, you'll consider technologies, modes, and ways of use. This means sometimes you will email, sometimes you will text, sometimes you will use a messenger application like Microsoft Teams, and sometimes you will create more formal documents or presentations that you share in person or via mail. You may need to communicate in writing, orally, or using a combination of both to be effective. Ways of use also matter. Materials may be used on certain devices, in certain locations or from certain distances that require you to reconsider how and in what form they are delivered.

Along with all these pieces, differences in style are incredibly important to understand. In academic writing, your audiences all have a vested interest in your writing, engage with it willingly, have dedicated time to focus on it, and include it as part of their agenda. In professional and technical writing, your audiences are often busy with their own agendas and may not always have the time or interest to read what you are writing. Getting and keeping your audience's attention requires writers to be more concise because the audience does not have as much time. Clarity is also important not only because readers will not devote as much energy to interpreting your ideas but because leaving room for interpretation in professional and technical communication can lead to negative results. The use of correct grammar, usage, and mechanics become even more important as errors can have greater costs. And as always, it is essential to establish yourself as a person of good will (*pathos*), good character (*ethos*), and good sense (*logos*). Making sure you are kind, honest, and logical in your communications remains important.

As you progress through the course, you will gain further understanding of how these differences in audience, purpose, genre, design, delivery, and style impact how and what you write.