

Introducing the ASPIRE Model

The ASPIRE model (Chuah, 2010) was proposed as a practical guide for writers who would like to improve their academic writing skills. Of course, it is not “the” model that would transform you into a prolific writer in a short period of time, but at the very least it gives you an idea of what is expected from you when writing academically.

What is ASPIRE?

A – Academic Voice

S – Scholarly Citations & References

P – Precise Descriptions

I – In-depth elaborations

R – Reduce clichés/redundancies

E – Effective Structure



To help you further develop your academic writing skills, this workshop is organised based on the ASPIRE Model. Each part has its sub-steps to be dealt upon.

ASPIRE – Academic Voice

***‘If we spoke as we write, we should find no one to listen.
If we wrote as we speak, we should find no one to read.’
~T. S. Eliot***

Although the jury is still out on this statement by T. S. Eliot, we need to accept the fact that writing and speaking are two different “arts” which influence each other. However, when it comes to academic writing (particularly in specific genres), the “academic voice” should be present.

Speaking versus Writing

Spoken text:

Speaking is [pause] er something we learn without really thinking about it [volume drops] usually from our mums and dads, but writing is something we really have to think about. It is [pause] um an expertise not everybody has. [intonation rises] Understand? Let me put it another way. Loads of people still can’t write [points finger].

Written text:

Speaking is a skill which we develop subconsciously (usually from our parents). Writing, however, has to be consciously developed. It is an expertise which, surprisingly, many people still do not possess. This is true even in the 21st century!

How to write with “academic voice”?

1. **Avoid Pretentiousness (Big words are not always better words)**
2. **Be clear & straightforward**
3. **Formal and objective language**
4. **Use technical terms when necessary**
5. **Avoid contractions (e.g. won’t, I’ll, it’s)**

Activity: The sentences below are all examples of spoken English. Rewrite them to make them more typical of written English.

1. ‘It’s clear, isn’t it, that your grammar has gotta be better in writing.’

2. Things don’t really change in writing, wherever you are, but in speaking they can change loads.

3. I believe it is hard to write academic essay because it’s just so complicated.

ASPIRE – Academic Voice

Should I use I in my writing?

Generally speaking, first-person pronouns (I or we, and their related forms such as me and us) are not used in academic writing. This is because good academic writing is based on what you can demonstrate rather than what you believe; it tends to be objective rather than subjective. When using I especially, one danger is that your writing is based on personal experience rather than on academic evidence.

There are a number of situations in which it is generally acceptable to use I or we in academic writing.

Thesis statement – this is especially true when your views are valued as in Reflection/Reaction papers.

I argue there are four main areas that distinguish academic writing from other types of writing.

To discuss your research – This is useful when you are personally involved in the process (although most researchers prefer to use the term “the researcher” or “the author”).

I interviewed 48 students to understand where they had most problems. It is common to use the first-person singular when discussing research which you have actually done yourself. It sounds strange (and slightly old-fashioned) to use depersonalized phrases, e.g., The interviewees responded ...'

Reflective writing- Reflective writing is written to share your personal views on a specific topic, hence the use of first-person pronouns is perfectly acceptable.

In the lecture, I was particularly interested in the section on academic writing.

ASPIRE – Scholarly Citations & References

'Fine words! I wonder where you stole them'
~Jonathan Swift

Before we move to the need for scholarly citations and references in academic writing, let's talk about plagiarism.

Plagiarism

One of the greatest crime in academia is plagiarism. Plagiarism generally refers to The adoption or reproduction of original creations of another author without giving credits or acknowledgements to the original author (Simmons, 1999).

Activity: Read the following sources and a student's first draft. Which aspects of the original sources are plagiarized in the student's first draft?

Original sources	First draft of student writing
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• 'Students were less certain about the concept of using someone else's ideas (Qu.Ib), with 40% of students not acknowledging that this was plagiarism' (Dawson and Overfield, 2006).	40% of students think that using someone else's ideas without reference is acceptable. Often, it is East Asian students who find this a particular problem, because in the Confucian system knowledge is seen as something which is shared by society (Sowden, 2005).
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• 'A similar point could be made about Chinese academic norms, which are the result in part of a long tradition of reproducing Confucian teachings in civil service exams. The philosopher's words were known by and belonged to everyone' (Sowden, 2005, p. 227).	It may also be a challenge for teachers when giving feedback, as they are often unaware of how to strike a balance between being sensitive to students' feelings, understanding potential cultural differences, and being clear and helpful in the messages they give.
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• 'We need to strike a balance between being sensitive to students' feelings, understanding potential cultural differences, and being clear and helpful in the messages we give through our feedback' (Hyland, 2000, p. 381).	

ASPIRE – Scholarly Citations & References

In academic writing, it is always advisable to justify your viewpoints or opinion with specific notable resources. The resources have to be “scholarly” in nature and not merely a statement given on unreliable sources such as blogs, Facebook or even forum.

Always get the facts from reliable sources – journals, books, reports. Always make sure the sources are recent and the authors are given.

Several useful websites are:

<http://scholar.google.com>

<http://sciencedirect.com>

<http://springerlink.com>

Note: When giving your opinion in reflection or reaction papers, you can still back up your views with scholarly references. In fact, it adds weight to your views (not the “I feel I am right, therefore I need not cite” type).

How can I use other people’s ideas in my writing?

1. Paraphrase

Paraphrase means **changing an original statement by retaining its meaning** with citation given. It doesn’t mean just because you change all the words, you can simply claim it is yours. Take note of the “5Cs Technique in Paraphrasing” (Chuah, 2010), ***Comprehend, Change, Combine, Check and Cite.***

Try to paraphrase this:

Success does not consist in never making mistakes but in never making the same one a second time. - George Bernard Shaw (1920)

2. Direct quotations

Direct quotations is usually less encouraged but when needed, it can still be used sparingly. It is the **total lifting of the original statements** with citation and page number (where you get the statement from) given. For example:

Shaw (1920) stated that “Success does not consist in never making mistakes but in never making the same one a second time” (p. 4).

Many quotations will be fewer than 15 words. As a general rule, you should justify any quotation which is longer than 15 words. Ask yourself:

- *Do I really need all the words? What is essential in this quotation?*
- *Might paraphrasing or summarizing be a better option?*

ASPIRE – Scholarly Citations & References

How can I use other people's ideas in my writing?

3. Summarise

One of the best way to avoid plagiarism is to summarise especially for longer statements/texts. Try to understand the whole parts and rewrite.

What strategies are there for paraphrasing?

Strategy 1: Changing the words

- Replacing words from the original text with synonyms is the simplest and most common way to paraphrase. However, note that synonyms do not mean exactly the same as each other.

Strategy 2: Changing the grammar

- Changing the voice (e.g. passive to active, active to passive), changing the word class (e.g. verb to noun), changing the structure.

Activity: Paraphrase the following sentences, each of which is taken from Keck (2006).

1. Such investigations are likely to play a crucial role in our larger efforts to help university students become confident and successful academic writers.

2. Many believe that the teaching of paraphrasing can help students to move beyond copying as a textual borrowing strategy.

ASPIRE – Scholarly Citations & References

How can I cite properly?

In academic writing, citations and referencing usually follow a specific style or convention. The most common style is APA (American Psychological Association) 6th Edition. It follows the Author-Date convention (similar to Harvard style).

In-text Citations

For APA, lastname or surname is used (except for Muslim names). E.g. David Beckham's book published in 2010 is cited as Beckham (2010) or (Beckham, 2010).

Author-focus = Beckham (2010) ← focus on the author.

Info-focus = (Beckham, 2010) ← information/statement is prioritized and citation is given later.

For Example:

According to Beckham (2010), football should be regarded as the main language of unity. Football should be regarded as the main language of unity (Beckham, 2010).

When two authors are involved, the word “and” is used for author-focus citations, while & is used for info-focus citation.

Adams and Jason (2013) stated that kangkung is a famous vegetable in Malaysia. Kangkung is a famous vegetable in Malaysia (Adams & Jason, 2013).

Note that *et al.* is used when more than three authors are involved (only for citations NOT the references).

E.g. (Jason, Adams, Kevin & Jim, 2010) => **(Jason *et al.*, 2010) or Jason *et al.* (2010)**

For Muslim names, it is an accepted convention to use the full name but “bin” or “binti” are omitted. Even other titles including Hj. or Hjh. are omitted.

Examples:

Mohamad Bin Hj. Ahmad → Mohamad Ahmad (2010)

Dato' Seri Abu Hassan → Abu Hassan (2010)

However, the Western style can still be used, especially when publishing internationally. So Mohamad Ahmad (in the example above) can be cited as Ahmad (2010).

ASPIRE – Scholarly Citations & References

How can I reference properly?

References are written according to the type of resources. The whole list of format can be obtained from <http://www.apastyle.org>. There are also applications that can assist you in generating proper referencing. The most common ones are EndNote and Mendeley.

Some common formats

Types	Reference Format
Books	Author, A. (Year). <i>Title of the book</i>. Place of publication: Publisher name. Author, A., & Author, B. (Year). <i>Title of the book</i>. Place of publication: Publisher name. <i>(Note: Only the first letter of the first word in the title and subtitle are capitalised except for proper nouns or acronyms e.g. Malaysia, Asia, AIDS)</i>
Examples:	Comfort, A. (1997). <i>A good age</i> . London, UK: Mitchell Beazley. Madden, R., & Hogan, T. (1997). <i>The definition of disability in Australia: Moving towards national consistency</i> . Canberra, Australia: Australian Institute of Health and Welfare.
Journal Articles	Author, A. (Year). Title of the article. <i>Journal Name</i>, Volume(Number), pages of the article.
Example:	Whitmeyer, J. M. (2000). Power through appointment. <i>Social Science Research</i> , 29(3), 535-555. <i>Note: For journal articles, Journal Name and Volume are italicized and not the title of the article. As for the journal number(sometimes called "issue"), not all journals provide number, in such case, provide volume only.</i>
Websites	Author, A. (n.d.). Title of the webpage. Retrieved DATE from http://www.website.com/fullpage.html Author, A. (Year). Title of the webpage. Retrieved from http://www.website.com/fullpage.html <div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 5px; display: inline-block; margin-left: 20px;">Retrieved date is given when no publication year is stated on the website</div>
Examples:	Adams, M. (n.d.). <i>Shaping the future: Careers in architecture</i> . Retrieved March 9, 2009, from http://www.careersinarchitectur e.net/articles/124.html Dawson, J., & Grey-Smith, S. (2002). <i>Trek 6: Referencing, not plagiarism</i> . Retrieved from http://www.academicworld.com/ referencing-not-plagiarism.html

ASPIRE – Precise Descriptions

'I wish he would explain his explanation.'
~Lord Byron

Precise description or explanation is needed when writing academic essays.

- Avoid giving vague descriptions and personal opinions (Unless the type of writing is opinion-based).
- Be straightforward in presenting your points – *avoid beating around the “forest”*.
- Provide facts or evidences whenever possible
- Use **hedging or cautious language** when trying to make a claim.

What language can I use to hedge?

A range of different grammatical structures are used in hedging. The most common are outlined below.

Introductory verbs

The data **seem to prove** the theory that using tentative language is a useful academic strategy. Other verbs in this category include: *tend to, assume, believe, indicate, suggest, appear to be.*

Modal verbs

Hedging **could** be the solution to many of your academic writing problems. Other verbs in this category include: *will, may, might and would.*

Modal adverbs

Hedging is **probably** one of the most effective ways in which distance can be created between the reader and the text. Other verbs in this category include: *possibly, probably, sometimes, often, generally, apparently, largely, conceivably.*

Activity: The following passage is perfectly acceptable, although it is written in relatively simple language. Try to improve it by giving better descriptions:

Language which is written in a complex way is a challenge for many students. However, it is a normal expectation at universities. It is important to note that many universities have responded to this problem by providing writing courses during term-time. It is not surprising that many students attend one or two classes and then leave. Others do attend the whole course.

ASPIRE – In-Depth Elaborations

‘Convincing yourself does not win an argument.’

~Robert Half

Arguments are very important in academic writing and it has to be in-depth in its elaborations.

Based only on your reading of this passage, which of the following conclusions do you think are true?

Arguments are a very important aspect of academic writing, and it is important that students understand how they work. Syllogisms are tools which can be used in making arguments. There are also other mechanisms, which are equally useful. The idea of the syllogism has ancient origins; Aristotle himself said an argument could be expressed as two premises and a conclusion, and he was never wrong. Proper analysis of the premises of your argument will lead to a suitable conclusion. Based on my teaching experience, it is clear that almost all students have difficulty using syllogisms - in the last class I taught, 7 out of 9 students found them difficult.

Conclusions	True/False
Arguments are unimportant in daily life.	
Most students have difficulty using syllogisms.	
Without a good argument, you cannot write well.	

When using arguments, you are attempting to convince the reader of your position. This process, known as persuasion, is a central concept in academic writing. In order to maximize your ability to persuade others of your opinions, **persuasive language** should be used.

It is claimed...

It can be seen that...

The reason for this is ...

As a result of...

Having considered the facts mentioned by X,

It is undeniable that...

X has provided a valuable insight on....., which is relevant to.....

The use of persuasive language can strengthen your elaborations. Supporting each with factual statements or resources.

ASPIRE – Reduce Clichés & Redundancies

‘It is something up with which I will not put.’
~Winston Churchill

Good academic writing tends to be free of “flowery” words with double meanings. It is advisable to avoid redundancies or using words/ phrases with repeated meanings or even clichés .

Some of the clichés are:

A cliché is a word or expression which has been used so much that it has lost its original meaning. Often a cliché is also an idiom . According to the Oxford English Corpus, the following are the most commonly used clichés in English:

- *back on track*
- *the fact of the matter*
- *few and far between*
- *a level playing field*
- *when all is said and done*
- *in this day and age*
- *to all intents and purposes*

Malaysians’ Favourite clichés:

1. *in this globalized/ICT era*
2. *in the society nowadays*
3. *by hook or by crook*
4. *part and parcel*
5. *cooperation from all parties*

These clichés should be reduced.

Also, it is good to avoid using “colloquial words” or slangs in your essays.

Slangs (Informal)	Formal
etc.	So on
Really	Extremely
More and more	Increasingly
Nowadays	Recently
Like	Such as
Kids	Children
A couple of	Several

ASPIRE – Reduce Clichés & Redundancies

The following passage contains several instances of informal language. Rewrite it in a more formal, academic style.

You might think that the sort of words you use in academic writing is not important. But nowadays, its becoming really important for you to choose your language and grammar carefully. The fact of the matter is that many students are influenced by the writing style of mags and papers! They just do the same.

Are there other expressions/phrases that you usually tend to overuse?

ASPIRE – Effective Structure

'It is all in pieces, all coherence gone.'

~John Donne

The structure or organisation of your academic writing is very important. It helps your reader to focus and present your points/arguments clearly. The structure may change according to genre/type of writing but the standard format is always “*Introduction, Body and Conclusion*”. However, effective structure is not just about combining all paragraphs, it is ensuring the ideas flow in the correct way (the coherence).

What does ‘coherence’ mean?

The areas of ‘coherence’ and ‘cohesion’ are closely related to each other. While cohesion generally refers to the way in which a text links together (e.g. the use of conjunctions and linking devices), coherence relates to the overall idea of logical development and whether your argument is consistent throughout. There are three key questions which can be asked in order to see if your text is coherent:

Is it clear?

- Does the argument develop in a clear, logical, step-by-step fashion?
- Have you chosen the correct overall structure for your essay?
- Have you written good topic sentences which clearly outline each paragraph?

Is it consistent?

- Is your argument/position the same at the beginning as at the end?

Is it concise?

- Does each paragraph contain only one main idea?

Activity: The following paragraph has been written in an incoherent way.

- **Identify three relevant problems.**
- **Rewrite it accordingly.**

There are many and varied important academic skills which exist and coherence is one of the more important ones, although it is one which many people do not always know much about. The logical progression of your argument should occur on a step-by-step basis. An argument means the position you take with regard to the essay title. To concern arguments you need ensure that you have particularly been careful and that your position is consistent throughout.

ASPIRE – Effective Structure

Let's try to look at the organisation/structure of the following types of writing. Also, take note of the language that can be used in each type.

Common Structure

Reflection	Reaction	Research Paper	Argumentative/ Discussion

Language Features

Reflection	Reaction	Research Paper	Argumentative/ Discussion

ASPIRE – Effective Structure

The General Structure

Introduction

- give brief background to the topic
- address definition of key words and issues (if needed)
- give your thesis statement (the statement that shape your whole essay)
- outline your main points

Body Paragraphs

- provide a topic sentence which says what the main point of each paragraph is
- provide supporting details for your topic sentence
- synthesise what you have read; that is, show what different people think about the same point
- show some critical thinking; that is, tell the readers what you think of what you have read,
- provide in-text citations for your information.

Conclusion

- recap your main points
 - reiterate your thesis
 - give your final word, if any
-

Writing Practice:

Let's try to write an academic essay on the given topic. First, do an outline the box below.

Extra: The Writing Process

There are **seven main steps** to writing a good essay. These are:

- **Analyse your prompt**
 - The first thing to do is to look at the essay prompt (the question) carefully and decide what kind of essay you are being asked to write.
 - Consider the important keywords in the prompt. Then briefly draw the outline of your essay focusing on those keywords.
- **Gather your information by research and reading**
 - It's always good to read about the topic first before writing.
 - To gather information by reading, secondary research, you need to read selectively either from a recommended bibliography or read around the topic trying to ascertain which information could be most useful to your essay.
- **Note where your information comes from**
 - It is an academic convention to acknowledge your sources and to distinguish where source information ends and your own original thinking begins. It is the academic way of showing that you are not plagiarising.
 - As you research and read, keep careful notes about where your material comes from. You may use Mendeley or EverNote software to help you keep track of all the readings.
- **Think of your thesis statement**
 - The most important idea in your essay is your central idea, which is called a thesis. The thesis controls the entire essay — all your main points will be a development of it, and all the minor supporting details will illustrate it.
 - Make sure that the thesis expresses a controlling idea that is neither too broad nor too specific to develop effectively and that it does not simply state the obvious
- **Organise your material**
 - A good essay is well-organised. It has a coherent structure that helps the reader make sense of the content. After gathering all the ideas, decide what to include in what order and how to let the reader know you are moving from one point to another.
 - Draw an outline and write down the important points for each part together with its relevant references.
- **Draft your essay**
 - Using your outline, write your essay — get all your thoughts down on paper. It does not have to be perfect first time.
 - Use formal English and aim for an objective tone.
 - Choose the most precise words and aim for a fluent and coherent style.
 - When you are referring to sources, paraphrase and use reported speech rather than a lot of direct quotation.
- **Revise your essay**
 - Revision consists of two steps: editing and proofreading.
 - Editing is the process of reading through your essay again and asking how well organised it is and how well your ideas are developed.
 - The final step is proofreading your essay. Read through your essay slowly looking for obvious errors such as spelling, punctuation or grammar and correct them.
 - Note: Make it a habit of saving your revised version



***'There is nothing either good or bad but
thinking makes it so.'***
~William Shakespeare (Hamlet Act 2, Scene 2)

Appendix

Further Readings

- Abrams, E. (2009). Essay structure. Retrieved on June 15, 2009, from <http://www.fas.harvard.edu/~wricntr/documents/Structure.html>
- Harris, J., & Moseley, A. (2000). *Strategies for college writing*. USA: Allyn and Bacon.
- Jordan, R.R. (1999). *Academic writing course*. United Kingdom: Pearson.
- Oshima, A., & Hogue, A. (2006). *Writing academic English*. New York: Pearson.
- Raimes, A. (2004). *Grammar troublespots*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Swales, J.M., & Feak, C.B. (2004). *Academic writing for graduate students*. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press

Referencing Tools

- Mendeley – www.mendeley.com (Free)
- EndNote – www.endnote.com (Subscription-based)
- Refworks - www.refworks.com
- Ref man - www.refman.com

Plagiarism Checker (FREE)

- PlagScan - <http://www.plagscan.com/seesources/analyse.php>
- Viper AntiPlagiarism - <http://www.scanmyessay.com/>