

Basics

Academic books and articles have a lot of long sentences with complex structures. Whereas general English texts (e.g. websites, newspapers) have a lot of short sentences, in academic writing almost every sentence can be used to connect several ideas and provide supporting details.

The academic context

As a student, you need to use an academic style of writing in your essays, coursework, assignments, research papers, etc. As you improve your ability to write more complex sentences, your writing will become clearer and more concise. This skill will also make you a more effective reader of academic texts.

Key features

First, draft your work. Then read your draft and look for ways you can make your sentences more complex. Think about these questions:

Which sentences are closely related?

- Can you link two sentences with a semicolon (;), a colon (:) or a conjunction (*and, so, or, but, because*)?
- Can you link two sentences by using one of them as a subordinate clause (with *because, although, since, whereas, when, if*)?

Which ideas could you express in a noun phrase?

- You can make a noun phrase by adding adjectives, adverbs, prepositions, extra nouns, articles and other phrases to a noun. Noun phrases are very useful for making your writing more complex because they let you include a lot of information in the subject of a sentence. This means you can use the object of the sentence to make a much more emphatic or subtle statement.

Which information is less important?

- Can you state less important information in a relative clause using *which*?
- Can you include other details between brackets (), commas (,) or dashes (–)?

Challenges / difficulties

Sometimes you need to use difficult grammatical structures in academic writing. Look out for interesting structures when you're reading.

This skill isn't about making your writing pretty or adding too much detail. Sometimes a short sentence is good! But often, instead of writing two or three short sentences about something, you will need to connect all your ideas into one longer, more complex sentence. Remember that even in a long sentence, you are still trying to be as clear as possible.

How can I develop this skill?

Be a bit daring, and don't worry if you make some mistakes. You'll improve as you get more practice. Academic writing is about creativity as well as correctness!

Learning outcome

When you have mastered this skill, you will be able to write more fluently in an academic style. You will be able express complex relationships between ideas in your writing.

Theory to practice

Read the text below. Match the numbered words, phrases and punctuation to the ways of making a more complex sentence.

Mysterious migrations

Some ducks work out which way is north by using Polaris – also known as the North Star –¹ which is one of the brightest stars in the sky.² But how they use this information to calculate their route over thousands of kilometres remains a mystery. Despite migrating many thousands of miles,³ whales move in astonishingly straight lines.⁴ Most pods of whales stray off course by no more than one degree, despite big changes in sea currents;⁵ again, no-one is entirely sure how they do it. They may use magnetic fields to help them navigate, and⁶ they also appear to use the position of the sun. Being able to process these different kinds of data in order to keep on course suggests that whales have an extraordinary additional sense⁷ or a vast amount of data processing power.⁸

- | | |
|---|-------|
| a subordinate clause | _____ |
| b relative clause | _____ |
| c conjunction linking two ideas | _____ |
| d semicolon linking two ideas | _____ |
| e parenthetical dashes | _____ |
| f noun phrase (article + adjective + adjective + noun) | _____ |
| g noun phrase (article + adjective + noun + preposition + noun + noun + noun) | _____ |
| h noun phrase (adverb + adjective + noun) | _____ |

Ways to get more practice

Work with a partner. Use a book or research paper on your reading list. Look for sentences which contain the features in Theory to practice. Can you find, or think of, any other ways of making complex sentences? Make a list.