Strand 3: Developing Academic Literacies

A: Academic Writing, Rhetoric and Persuasive Writing

Ai: Identify appropriate terminology, use of language and academic idiom in your discipline.

Diagnosis and referral:

Case Study: A student submits a piece of writing which does not 'sound' academic. The tone varies between overly formal and verbose to colloquial. At times, it sounds almost journalistic, with unsubstantiated generalisations and subjective statements. In other places, it reads more like a catalogue of what the student has read, with very little input from the student themselves.

Developing academic writing is more than good grammar and style; it is a very specific genre of writing which is shaped by the social and epistemological requirements of the context and discipline. The student may not have encountered this specific variety of writing outside Higher Education; the aims and demands of writing in school work or in non-academic contexts differ to some degree and may not be directly transferable. Academic writing conventions differ between subjects, and also between cultural contexts. US academic English is subtly different in a number of respects from UK academic English, and other languages will have their own conventions too. International students who have undertaken a pre-sessional course in academic English may find that they have learned a 'generic' academic English which does not quite fit the specific conventions of their subject. Any student entering Higher Education will be making a transition from other social, cultural and disciplinary contexts and even for some British students, UK academic English may feel almost like a foreign language to be learned.

Finding their 'own' academic voice within the conventions that exist is a complex process of development which may challenging the student's sense of identity if it does not feel natural to them. This can result in a rather uneven tone varying between overly formal and informal, as they experiment with a written register which is unfamiliar to them. Their writing style may contain grammatical mistakes, but this will more often be due to transferring their mastery of conventions which are appropriate in other contexts but not in this, or their assumptions about the new style in which they are as yet not fluent. The connection between writing and identity through the authorial voice may mean that developing academic writing is a sensitive area for some students. Some may have perfectionist tendencies about the way they express themselves, which can make working patterns less efficient; lack of confidence may lead some students to resort to plagiarism as they use poor strategies to construct a text that sounds academic out of a paraphrase or patchwork of other texts.
Students may to a greater or lesser extent be aware of the text as belonging to a specific genre or as an argument rather than a source of neutral information; when reading for an assignment, however, they may lose sight of the fact that the texts they are reading offer a model on which to base their own style.

**Setting up the next supervision:**

- Ask students to reflect on the reading they have been doing for previous assignments, and to identify what the characteristic features of the texts they are reading are, as pieces of academic writing. Depending on the range of material types they are required to access, you may need them to think about the different features of books versus journal articles etc, as well as those features which are common to all types of academic writing in your field.

- You might as an alternative offer them a page or short section from an academic text which offers a number of these features, and ask them to identify the features and add others they have seen elsewhere.

- Discuss with them briefly to what extent it is appropriate for them as students to use these features as a model for their own writing, and what they and you are aiming for in their writing in terms of language and style.

These features might include:

- The characteristic structure, and what each section of a text is used for
- The presentation, including layout and formatting
- The terminology - where it is unique to a field of academic study and where terms are lent meanings additional to their everyday ones (also for what effect and purpose these are used)
- The ways in which the language used presents itself as neutral, subtly or overtly persuasive
- The way in which the author(s) is present in the text
- Characteristic style features or expressions. These might include the use of cohesion (from simple examples such as ‘and’, ‘but’, to more elevated ones such as ‘moreover’, ‘therefore’ etc)
- The extent to which the individual author tries to offer a characteristic style or strives to make their voice conform to a genre norm (this may include discussion of the status of the author and context of writing eg a textbook vs a monograph)
- Differences in context: US academic English differs slightly from UK academic English, and there are significant variations between the disciplines (which may be especially relevant if the student is on an interdisciplinary tripos)

You may wish to focus on a subsection of these in any one supervision.

- During their reading for the next assignment, you could ask them to choose one item and highlight a photocopy, selecting the features they consider to be most characteristic of academic style. *(Supplemental activity: They might then append a section of this highlighted copy to their assignment, and highlight where they have incorporated similar linguistic features themselves. This could be discussed in feedback or in the supervision).*
To allow students to experiment with their style and find their own academic voice, you might ask or allow them to annotate their essay with alternative phrasings they considered or query ones they were not confident about, so that you establish an agreement between you that the assignment is not to be viewed as a final statement of their best style, but a safe space to experiment and try things out. This may be particularly helpful for international students.

The Assignment:

• Ask students to highlight the features of their written work which they consider to be characteristically ‘academic’ in tone.

• In addition to their assignment, you could ask students to convert a short section of their writing into an exaggerated ‘pastiche’ of academic writing, to be submitted with the assignment. This will enable you to establish what their assumptions about academic writing are and discuss to what extent they are accurate. (Alternative activity: you might ask them also to produce a version in an inappropriate register, to highlight the features of non-academic writing)

Supervision Activities:

• Ask student to bring along an example of a piece of academic writing that they found particularly well-written, and/or one they found poorly written or that they had difficulty following. Ask them to prepare to discuss their reasons for their response by analysing the text’s linguistic features, thinking about the function of these features and why they were successful or unsuccessful.

• Ask the student to preserve the first draft of the assignment, and bring it with them to the supervision. Ask them to explain the decisions that they made when redrafting their writing, in terms of academic style. This will also encourage them to manage the process of writing well, including leaving time for drafting and editing.

Gaining an Overview

• Ask students to bring with them to the final supervision (in the term or year) their first assignment for you and discuss how their style has improved or needs further development on recurring issues, using the two pieces of work as a contrast. Ask them to reflect on the conscious and unconscious developments in their academic style. This might be included in their termly report.

• Ask students to identify what they have learned about academic writing from other supervisors. This may need to be handled sensitively, but could offer a valuable opportunity for them to distinguish between the generally accepted norms of academic writing in your discipline and the valid scope for personal preference in academic writing styles. This may help highlight and normalise for them the need to pick up on and adapt writing style for different audiences, and make you aware of any idiosyncratic areas of difference that your students are negotiating between your own preferences and those of your colleagues.

Feedback:
• It is helpful to be specific about the aspect of a student’s writing that you feel needs to be improved, and to indicate (at least the first few) instances to begin with, with a correct or preferable version if appropriate. However, to develop the skills to improve their writing independently, they should be encourage to access resources themselves. To do this they may need a clear indication of the issue (to aid in looking it up in reference works) and some suggestions of what resources might be useful.

• Some style and grammar books, for example, are dated, too comprehensive (especially those for non-native speakers) or do not focus on academic style. There are increasing numbers of ‘study skills’ books which focus on or contain advice on writing style on the market, which are accessible and relevant for students, and it might be worth having a quick look in the library or bookshop for ones you would be comfortable recommending. There are also websites such as the Online Writing Lab at Purdue University (http://owl.english.purdue.edu/) which may be useful. The college may also have a skills tutor or Royal Literary Fellow who may be able to see the student for a supervision to discuss their writing. The Language Centre will be able to advise students who are non-native speakers of English.

• It is helpful as well as gratifying for the student to know exactly what they have done well so that they can replicate it in future work. If good use of style is identified (through highlighting specific examples or the general principle), then students are aware of precisely what it is about their writing that constitutes good academic style and can act on it; a comment such as “well-written” does not help the student to know what it is that they should build on.