Chapter 1

What is Academic English?

a) **Academic English vs Everyday English**

b) **General Features of Academic English**

(With Suggested Answers and Explanations)

Everyday English and Academic English – What are they?

Everyday/General English is the English used in our daily lives. It forms the foundation for everyday communication. However, when it comes to English for academic studies (e.g. Science, Mathematics), everyday English may not suffice as technical words or more complicated sentence patterns may be needed. **Academic English**, which is the English used in academic contexts (e.g. academic essays, seminars, journals), is essential for academic communication. Promoting the academic use of English helps heighten students' awareness of English commonly used in academic texts, thereby facilitating their transfer and application of English knowledge and skills in other subjects.

1a: Academic English vs Everyday English

Academic English is different from everyday English. They are found in different types of texts.

Practice
Activity 1

Below is a list of text types. Match each of the text types in the word box to the appropriate type of English by putting it under either **"Academic English"** or **"Everyday English"**.

Geography textbooks	advertisements	diary entries	science reports
essays	romance novels	information books	journal articles
research papers	restaurant reviews	play scripts	encyclopedias

Academic English	Everyday English
Geography textbooks	advertisements
science reports	diary entries
essays	romance novels
information books	restaurant reviews
journal articles	play scripts
research papers	
encyclopedias	

1b: General Features of Academic English

Academic texts are characterised by a specific style with the following four features:

- i) **formality**
- ii) **objectivity**
- iii) **precision**
- iv) **technicality**

i) Formality

Academic texts have their own set of rules and structures. To sound professional and objective, a **formal style** is usually adopted in these texts.

Practice

Activity 2

Read the two texts below and decide which one is written in a more formal style. Put a tick in the correct box.

A.

The research has been underway for four years. Researchers have yet reached a conclusion. They are expecting the government to continue to provide financial assistance on the research.

B.

The research has been going on for four years. Researchers still can't tell the result. They are expecting the government to go on giving money to support the research.

> *Notes:*
>
> The following are some ways to create a formal style in writing:
>
> - **Use formal words**: A more formal word "underway" instead of the phrasal verb "going on" is used.
> - **Avoid contractions**: "have yet reached a conclusion" is used instead of "can't tell the result".
> - **Avoid phrasal verbs, colloquial and vague expressions**: "continue" instead of "go on" and "financial assistance" instead of "money to support" are used.

ii) Objectivity

> **Tone**

Academic texts usually adopt an **objective** and **impersonal tone** which makes them sound unbiased or persuasive to the audience. In academic texts, evaluations and judgements are usually presented based on findings or evidence. Personal feelings and opinions, emotional adjectives and intensifiers (i.e. adverbs that add force to other expressions) should be avoided.

Practice

Activity 3

The text in the box below is neither objective nor impersonal. Identify **three words** that need to be replaced with reference to the reasons provided.

> **The respondents were thrilled by the proposal. I believe they will definitely support the campaign.**

Words to be replaced	Reasons for replacement
thrilled	avoid using emotional words
I	avoid using 1st and 2nd person pronouns
definitely	avoid using strong adverbs or intensifiers

Read the text above again. Rewrite it to sound more objective.

Suggested answer:

The respondents were **positive** about the proposal. **It is believed that** they would support the campaign.

> *Notes:*
>
> In the suggested answer, the emotional adjective "thrilled" is replaced by "positive", the intensifier "definitely" is removed and the passive structure "It is believed that…" is used to create an objective tone.

Academic
Use of English

➢ **Hedging**

In academic texts, in particular research studies and science reports, writers need to be cautious and critical about the claims and comments they make. **Hedging** or **tentative language** is thus used to put forward an argument or idea to avoid making over-generalisations or faulty assumptions.

Examples:

(a) Identical twins have similar personalities.

(b) Identical twins **may, tend to , likely** have similar personalities.

> *Notes:*
>
> Sentence (a) assumes that **all** identical twins have similar personalities. In Sentence (b), the use of "may", "tend to" and "likely" helps to soften the tone and avoid over-generalisation.

Practice

Activity 4

Study the following sentences. Choose the sentences in which hedging language is used.

1. a) Based on the findings, social media are a crucial factor for the success of K-pop. ☐

   b) Based on the findings, social media appear to be a crucial factor for the success of K-pop. ☑

2. a) The vaccine may be effective in preventing people aged over 60 from getting the disease. ☑

   b) The vaccine is effective in preventing people aged over 60 from getting the disease. ☐

3. a) Boys are taller than girls. ☐

   b) Boys are generally taller than girls. ☑

Notes:

Below are some explanations for Questions 1-3.

1) With the use of "are", the first sentence presents the findings with absolute certainty. Such a claim should be supported by very strong evidence. The use of "appear to be" in the second sentence softens the tone and makes it less absolute when the evidence is not sufficient to support the claim.

2) The use of the modal verb "may" in the first sentence makes the claim less certain.

3) The use of the adverb "generally" in the second sentence helps to avoid over-generalisation.

iii) Precision

To avoid ambiguity, academic texts are marked by exactness and accuracy in terms of the

(1) **choice of words** and

(2) **amount of details**.

Examples:

(1a)   New plants that can be grown under severe weather conditions are under investigation.

(1b)   **Drought-tolerant maize and cold-resistant rice** that can be grown under severe weather conditions are under investigation.

(2a)   Different skills are needed to start a business.

(2b)   Various skills such as **business management skills, financial accounting skills and interpersonal skills** are needed to start a business.

> *Notes:*
>
> In Sentence (1b), subject-specific words like "drought-tolerant" and "cold-resistant" are used to make the ideas more precise and accurate.
>
> Sentence (2b) is much clearer than Sentence (2a) as it includes more details about the skills needed to start a business.

Practice

Activity 5

Compare each pair of sentences. Choose the sentence which is more precise.

1. a) Middle-aged men have a higher chance of stroke.   ☐

   b) Men over 55 have a higher chance of stroke.   ☑

2. a) In some countries, a meal usually comprises three courses.   ☐

   b) In some western countries, a meal usually comprises an appetiser, a main course and a dessert.   ☑

3. c) The survey conducted a few years ago showed that many people had symptoms of depression.   ☐

   d) The survey conducted three years ago showed that two-thirds of the respondents had symptoms of depression.   ☑

Notes:

Below are some explanations for Questions 1-3.

1) "Middle-aged" is a vague term whereas "over 55" provides specific details.

2) "Some countries" and "three courses" are general words whereas "some western countries" and "an appetiser, a main course and a dessert" provide specific details for the general words used in Sentence (a).

3) "A few", "many" and "people" are vague terms whereas "three years", "two-thirds" and "respondents" provide more specific details.

iv) Technicality

Subject-specific or **technical vocabulary** is essential to understanding and writing academic texts. To understand and retain the subject-specific vocabulary better, it is crucial to understand how these words are formed. For example, the prefix "photo-" means "light", so the words "photosynthesis" and "photoconduction", which can be found in science texts, are both related to "light". Likewise, the suffix "-ism" means "a belief, theory or practice". Words like "feudalism" and "Marxism", which can be found in history texts, carry this meaning. The meanings of some subject-specific words may vary in different subjects or contexts. For example, the common word "mean" has a special meaning in mathematical contexts (i.e. "average").

Practice

Activity 6

The words in the left column below are words with multiple meanings in different subject contexts. Match them to the appropriate subject(s) by putting a tick (✔) in the appropriate box(es). Consult a dictionary if needed. One of them has been done as an example.

Words with multiple meanings	Subjects						
	Geography	**Science**	**History**	**Maths**	**P.E.**	**Music**	**Economics**
e.g. current	✔	✔					
legend	✔		✔				
scale	✔	✔		✔	✔	✔	✔
class		✔	✔	✔			✔
note						✔	✔
slope	✔	✔		✔			✔
axis	✔	✔	✔	✔			

Notes:

The multiple meanings of the words provided below help to explain the suggested answers in Activity 6.

current (n):

1. [Geography/Science] a movement of water, air, or electricity

legend (n):

1. [History] an old story from the ancient time
2. [Geography] the words written on or next to a map that explain what it is about or what the symbols on it mean

scale (n):

1. [Maths/Science] a set of numbers, amounts, etc., used to measure or compare the level of something
2. [Geography] the relation between the real size of something and its size on a map or diagram
3. [P.E./Maths/Science] a device for weighing things or people
4. [Music] a set of notes played or sung in order, going up or down
5. [Science] a small, flat piece that covers the skin of fish, snakes, etc.
6. [Economics] the size or level of business

class (n):

1. [Science] a group of things, animals, or people with similar features or qualities
2. [History/Economics] a group of people in a society who have the same social and/or economic position
3. [Maths] a group of objects with some common properties

note (n):

1. [Music] a single sound at a particular level in music
2. [Economics] a banknote

slope (n):

1. [Geography] a rising or falling surface/ground
2. [Maths] the steepness of a line in a graph
3. [Science] the steepness of an inclined plane
4. [Economics] a concept which measures the relationship between two variables

axis (n):

1. [Geography/Science] an imaginary line about which a body rotates
2. [Maths] a fixed line for showing measurements or finding the position of points on a graph
3. [History] an agreement between governments or politicians to work together for a common aim