

How to write authoritatively in your field from the outset

Specialists recognize authoritative writing in their field of study and respond well to it, continuing to read on. Equally, they recognize non-authoritative writing and often quickly abandon reading a research paper because of the author's apparent lack of authority in the field. So, what characterizes authoritative academic writing, and how can you write with the necessary authority for your readers?

Writing with authority comes with experience in your specialist field, as your knowledge deepens over time. However, it also comes from the particular style in which you and your colleagues write. This is good news for young researchers, who need to write and publish from early on in their careers: learning to recognize the writing style used in their discipline from the outset means that they can immediately start trying to incorporate that style in their writing. This will increase the chances of their work being read—and hopefully cited—in their research community.

In this article, we'll give some quick tips on how to write with authority in your particular field, whatever stage you may be at in your research career.

How many of these tips do you know and already follow when you're writing?

1. **Use standard phrases: identify, then apply**
2. **Follow the writing conventions in your field: pay attention to detail**
3. **Write for your specific readers: consider shared knowledge**
4. **Choose your citations wisely: balance is key**

All of these tips are easy to apply once you gather knowledge and work to systematically incorporate them into your writing.

1. Use standard phrases: identify, then apply

Identify and highlight common phrases in papers published in top-tier journals in your field.

Consider the context of these phrases. Do they appear in many different papers by different authors? Can they apply well to different areas of research?

Phrases that appear in multiple contexts and by multiple authors are the standard phrases of that discipline and can be used to convey information to your colleagues with authority and assurance.

In the examples of standard phrases/formats below, some are used in many disciplines and others are used in a few specific disciplines only. Are any of these examples common in your subject area?

Standard phrases

Hitherto, we have accepted that...	Against this background, we hypothesized that...
The aim of this study was to...	To investigate whether X was...
Here, we report a case of...	Let us examine the case of...
The methods for X were reported previously. Briefly,...	Thirty subjects (15 men, 15 women; mean age, 24.4 ± 3.5 years; range, 20-39 years)...
X peaked at day 3 before decreasing thereafter.	No changes were observed in...
There was a significant positive correlation between...	A tendency for X was evident from...
To our delight, we obtained...	If X holds true, then...
Given these findings, we suggest that...	It is a matter of concern that...
This is the first time X has been demonstrated in...	It is reasonable to assume that...
This study has some limitations.	Further studies of X are warranted.

Authors at our writing workshops often ask if using standard phrases constitutes plagiarism, because these phrases are sometimes identified by anti-plagiarism detection software as exact text matches to previously published work. The answer is no. Plagiarism concerns the misappropriation of intellectual property—in the form of ideas or text (verbatim or almost verbatim)—without proper credit. These widely used standard phrases do not contain specific intellectual property reported previously by others. Therefore, the similarity score of a manuscript, which reflects exact text matches identified by anti-plagiarism detection software, should not be used as an indicator of plagiarism in and of itself; the similarity score is a guide only, and the instances of exact text matches must be interpreted carefully to identify actual instances of unintentional or intentional plagiarism. If you'd like help interpreting similarity reports, please ask us about our Originality Check service.

2. Follow the writing conventions in your field: pay attention to detail

To write authoritatively in your field, you first need to identify the elements of style used and then incorporate them in your writing. You can take an ad-hoc or a systematic approach to help you identify these elements of style.

- i. Look out for writing conventions while reading high-quality English papers published in top-tier journals in your field. Usually, these papers have been professionally copyedited to ensure that the published text follows each journal's formatting guidelines and writing conventions used in your discipline. Also, some journals give specific instructions or guidance on the writing conventions that they want you to follow in their guidelines for authors.
- ii. Examine the writing style used by specialist editors who edit your papers. Specialist editors know the writing conventions used in their particular fields and apply them when editing. You can check the revisions our editors make to your papers by reviewing the changes tracked in the "-1view" files we provide.
- iii. Consult a published style guide to take a more systematic approach to learning the style used in your field. There are many style guides in use, so you need to consult the most appropriate one for your subject area. You won't need to learn all the conventions stated in a guide unless you want to (that an editor's job!), but you can find out commonly used conventions to start using in your writing.

Here at ThinkSCIENCE, we most commonly use these style guides.

ACS American Chemical Society	AMA American Medical Association	APA American Psychological Association
<u>ACS Style Guide: Effective Communication of Scientific Information</u>	<u>AMA Manual of Style: A Guide for Authors and Editors</u>	<u>Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association</u>
Chemistry and technical writing	Medicine and health	Social science, behavioral science, and psychology
Chicago University of Chicago Press	CSE Council of Science Editors	MLA Modern Language Association
<u>The Chicago Manual of Style</u>	<u>Scientific Style and Format: The CSE Manual for Authors, Editors, and Publishers</u>	<u>MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers</u>
Broad guidelines for various fields	Broad guidelines for scientific papers	Humanities, culture, and literature

Although the aim of each style guide is the same—to promote clear, accurate, and authoritative writing that is appropriate to the field—the contents often differ between the guides, sometimes obviously and sometimes more subtly. Let's look at an example of each.

An obvious difference that exists between the style guides concerns the treatment of numerals. Although some conventions for using numerals are consistent across the style guides—for instance, a number at the beginning of a sentence should be spelled out in full, and numerals must be used whenever a number is paired with a unit ("5 km," not "five km")—the conventions for reporting numbers in running text can vary greatly. Some style guides have pages of conventions on just this topic. Following these conventions is particularly helpful when the text contains many numerals in close proximity. It also ensures consistency of reporting throughout the paper, which improves readability.

Here's how a section of text containing various numerals would differ according to the style guide used.

APA	Chicago	CSE
The study area included 12 cities in three prefectures. One hundred and fifteen schools were sent surveys and 13,321 individual responses were collected.	The study area included twelve cities in three prefectures. One hundred fifteen schools were sent surveys and 13,321 individual responses were collected.	The study area included 12 cities in 3 prefectures. A total of 115 schools were sent surveys and 13 321 individual responses were collected.

APA generally spells out numbers up to and including 10, and uses numerals for 11 and higher. Numerals cannot begin a sentence, and so should be spelled out in full. Numerals with five or more digits are grouped using a comma.

Chicago generally spells out words between 0 and 100 when used non-technically. Numerals cannot begin a sentence, and so should be spelled out in full. Chicago also requires that "and" not be used when numbers are written out. Numerals with five or more digits are grouped using a comma.

CSE prefers to use numerals for quantities wherever possible. As in other styles, numerals cannot begin a sentence, but CSE recommends instead rewording the sentence so that numerals can be used. Numerals with five or more digits are grouped using a thin space, but CSE notes that regional conventions should be followed, such as a comma for American audiences.

Let's look now at a more subtle difference between the style guides. The following example shows how the title of a work might change depending on the style guide applied.

AMA	Long-term Changes in Decision to Treat X With Y AMA does not capitalize the second item in hyphenated phrases using a prefix, and capitalizes prepositions as long as they are 4 letters or longer.
MLA	Long-Term Changes in Decision to Treat X with Y MLA capitalizes the second item in all hyphenated phrases, but writes all prepositions in lowercase, regardless of length.
ACS	Long-term Changes in Decision To Treat X with Y ACS does not capitalize the second item in hyphenated phrases using a prefix, writes all prepositions in lowercase, and also capitalizes the "to" in infinitive verbs.

Many journals and publishers will base their house style on a particular style guide and then make minor modifications to suit their specific needs. So, when you are writing for a specific journal, it's important to remember that **the journal's style takes precedence** over the general style mentioned in style guides. First and foremost, follow any specific writing conventions stated in the journal's guidelines, and then follow the general writing conventions in your field as a "fallback" default style.

As a final point of note, if you spend time and effort learning to apply the writing conventions in your field in your writing and then you ask someone who is not familiar with your field to edit your text, he or she could very quickly undo all of your hard work. You can always ask whether an editor will follow the particular writing style used in your field. ThinkSCIENCE editors know the writing conventions used in their subject areas, and we're happy for you to ask us any specific questions about writing style when we're editing your papers. Or, ask us questions any time through our secure online Q&A support service, [Ronbun Support](#).

3. Write for your specific readers: consider shared knowledge

We've written recently about the importance of considering shared knowledge in order to [communicate effectively with the audience at conferences](#). Using shared knowledge to connect with your readership is equally important. It can make your writing not only more authoritative but also more accessible.

When writing for highly specialized readers, focus on defining only highly specialized or relatively new technical terms in your field; defining basic terms in this case may imply that you don't know your readers well because of a lack of experience writing in the field. Conversely, when writing for less specialized readers, consider carefully which terms to define. If you use too many technical terms (too much jargon), they may have trouble understanding your message quickly and easily—although you may be perceived as authoritative, your message may also be misunderstood or your paper abandoned as too difficult and time-consuming to read.

4. Choose your citations wisely: balance is key

A fundamental part of writing with authority is to place your work in context, by discussing the motivation for your research and the implications of your findings in reference to previously published work. Citing previous work shows your knowledge of the field, but balance is key here: too few or too many citations can give the impression of a lack of in-depth knowledge. The right balance is determined by the type of manuscript you are writing and the specific audience you are writing for.

The purpose of writing a dissertation or thesis is to demonstrate sufficient knowledge in the field to warrant being awarded a degree. Therefore, these types of manuscripts are “citation dense.” The purpose of writing research papers is to communicate with knowledgeable readers—usually specialists—who already share certain knowledge with you (see Tip 3 above). These readers need to see only the most relevant material to support your message. Be selective in what you cite in order to maintain focus on your message.

Try to cite the most recent studies that support your point, but note that there is no need to give an exhaustive list. If a number of recent studies report a particular finding, cite just one or two of them as examples, or consider citing a review study that discusses all of them in the way that you wish to discuss them.

Lastly, position citations near the relevant parts of a sentence rather than grouping the citations together at the end of a sentence. This writing is authoritative because it is highly accurate and avoids potential misreadings.

Compare:

These findings were subsequently confirmed in mice, rats, dogs, and humans [4-6].

These findings were subsequently confirmed in mice, rats [4], dogs [5], and humans [6].

In the first sentence, it is unclear whether each study examined all four models, one model, or some mixture of these. In the second sentence, the reader now clearly knows which study examined which model.

Summary

Naturally, being an effective writer consists of more than being an authoritative writer, but we hope these specific tips are helpful to you when writing.

If you'd like to know more about improvements you can make—such as specific writing strategies for being clear, concise, accurate, and ethically sound—we offer a variety of practical ways for authors to learn how to apply general and field-specific writing strategies. We run group and individual workshops and semester courses, in person or via the internet, that are tailored to subject areas. Please ask us for details about programs in your location or subject field. For authors who can't attend such sessions, we offer personalized writing feedback and support through our EditingPLUS service.