How to decipher academic writing

Introduction

To become a fully-fledged E3 student (effective, engaged, and employable), it's important to go beyond textbooks. You'll need to read and consider academic books and articles in order to build on current criminological thinking and produce your own knowledge.

However, we know that academic writing can be intimidating and hard to understand, so some of *The Oxford Textbook on Criminology*'s authors have added annotations to their own journal articles to 'demystify' them, so that you can apply the same principles to other articles and books you read. We hope that the comments they've added will give you an insight into academic authors' minds, explain what's going on and what techniques are being used, and help you 'translate' the formal language to get a sense of the key points being made.

This knowledge should make you a more effective reader and knowledge-producer, able to cut to the heart of what's being communicated and confidently use sources in your studies.

Types of academic writing

To find out more about the different types of academic writing you will encounter in your studies, read the section in Chapter 1 of *The Oxford Textbook on Criminology* called **'Criminological learning resources'**. This explains the differences between the main types of resources you'll come across.

The most formally-written resources (so the ones that you may need to work hardest to 'decode') are monographs, critical analysis texts, edited texts, journal articles, and reports. We have provided numerous suggestions for relevant resources of these kinds in the end-of-chapter further reading lists and also within the book's online resources, but the pieces of academic writing the authors have 'demystified' here are journal articles.

These are the main generalist criminology journals you will probably encounter in your studies:

- **Criminal Justice Matters** – this journal is no longer publishing but its entire archive from 1989-2015 is freely available. It comprises short pieces that are focused on contemporary criminal justice issues and are written in an accessible style, aimed at a readership beyond academics. This resource offers fascinating introductory reading on criminal justice problems that were known to exist in the system (and still do?).
- **British Journal of Criminology** – this is one of the leading criminology journals globally and contains in-depth articles on crime and society that are written from a variety of perspectives. In addition to political or policy arguments, it often focuses on issues of sociology, history, philosophy, and geography. It also has a comprehensive book review section where contemporary texts are critically reviewed by experts in the field – this can be extremely helpful when you are trying to deduce others' opinions on the influential books in your topic area.

- **Prison Service Journal** – this is published by HM Prison Service and contains medium-length articles which are between the size of those in the above two journals. Its prime focus is the work of the Prison Service but this can expand into the wider Criminal Justice System and its associated fields. Again, use of its archive will be highly beneficial, particularly when a special edition is published – see, for example, the restorative justice edition published in 2016.

One point that it's important to remember in relation to all types of academic writing for publication is that, unlike your coursework essays, these pieces are not obliged to present alternative arguments: authors can freely put forward a specific viewpoint without acknowledging other positions.

Key principles

These are the key principles we recommend you keep in mind when trying to digest a piece of academic writing:

- **Know how the type of work tends to be structured and use this knowledge to help you read.** For articles in particular, knowing how to navigate through the discussion can help you identify the central thread or argument, and to easily navigate and find the information you want. As you can see from the authors' annotations, many articles follow the following pattern (which is not dissimilar from many of the essays you'll have written at school):

  1. Begin with an abstract
  2. Move on to introductory paragraphs that set the scene and look at the background, often giving an overview of what will be covered and what direction the article will take
  3. Outline the method and explain how the author has gone about exploring the subject in question
  4. Set out the issue(s) and draw on the previous work of a number of academic commentators
  5. Start to draw out the author's own perspective on things
  6. Home in on the author's recommendations
  7. Finish with a conclusion

  So if you want to see a summary of what the author aims to do in the article, zone in on the introductory section, and if you want to get a quick sense of the argument the author is putting forward – their position on the area discussed – you should go straight to the conclusion. It's also a good idea to pay attention to the headings – as shown in Roger's article, these often indicate the direction of the piece and where the author is steering the discussion next.

- **Break academic writing down into manageable sections.** This principle applies both on a whole-piece level (books, chapters, articles) but also on a more granular level (paragraphs, sentences, phrases). Academic pieces can feel very dense compared to content you've encountered before, particularly since (as Steve notes in his comments) academics often try to say a lot very quickly: they're passionate about

their subject and have strong views that they want to get across in as much detail as possible, so sentences can get long and arguments complex.

If a chapter or article isn't already divided into clear parts, you might find it useful to create your own and number/name the different sections. This way, when you return to it for revision or when writing an essay, you can skip straight to the relevant material as your notes will refer to part 4, 5 etc. This kind of organisation will help you feel more in control of your learning from academic material, and will also give you a clearer sense of the structure of the piece.

The same idea applies to complex paragraphs, sentences, and phrases: when the writing becomes hard to follow, break it down and try to identify and translate the key terms on which the argument hinges – as you would in an introduction to an essay. You may often find that very long sentences are simply paraphrased quotes.

- **Remember that as you are in an academic community it is very likely others will have previously read what you are reading** and their comments may help you to understand and analyse the work. Most academic articles have a book review section, and these reviews guide you through the whole book and offer opinions you could consider in your own writing. You can gain similar help through reading other academic journal pieces and their articles on literature review studies, and also through simply being alert in your seminars: the better an idea you have of the various viewpoints on a certain issue, the easier you will find it to understand and digest academic works. However you should, of course, avoid over-relying on others and ensure that you do read and consider the materials yourself – surely you wouldn't rely on watching Gogglebox to feel fully informed about current TV programmes?

- **Don't let jargon and/or unusual terminology panic you**. Look up key words on Google or in a dictionary and break complex-sounding phrases down into manageable chunks, but (like with learning a language or reading/listening to Shakespeare) you'll probably find that if you allow yourself to read through passages without panicking or attempting to understand every single word, you still get the gist of what is being said. And as Roger says, don't assume you're being dim if you can't understand a point that's being made – it's just as likely to be clumsy wording from the author. No one's perfect!

- **Remember that academic writers are still human**, approachable, and capable of speaking more casually and 'normally'. They're just following a particular convention in terms of style and tone – like how an opera singer can sing both in a warbly, classical style 'on duty' but could easily sing in a more casual, 'normal' way if they were listening to Radio 1 in the car.

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