

SIX FEATURES OF SCIENCE-THEMED WRITING

1. APA (or other scientific) citations

Citations in the sciences are author-date, and page numbers are only included for direct quotes. This is not an arbitrary rule—this is because of the emphasis on newness in science, rather than simply authority. WHEN something was written matters!

2. Focus on synthesis rather than summary

It is rare in the sciences to spend an entire paragraph describing a single study. Instead, authors put the emphasis on synthesizing multiple sources that deal with a topic. In this way, evidence can be used quite differently than in the humanities.

3. Infrequent use of quotations

Typically, in the sciences there is an emphasis on WHAT is said rather on HOW something is said. Therefore, quotations are rarely used. Exceptions include definitions, provocative language, or any situation in which the wording is critical to the meaning.

4. Objective approach

In scientific writing, data counts more than opinions. Since theory and argument must be based on evidence, there is little room for subjectivity or emotional reactions.

5. Clear and accurate writing style

In science, there is an emphasis on clarity and being accurate. Ornate language is used less frequently and should never detract from the clarity of the argument.

This stylistic difference is particularly prominent in introductions and conclusions. While motive still matters in science, the motivation for writing can be more specific to the scientific question. Science writers often begin with a broad statement but quickly focus on the specific question or problem to be argued.

6. Rare use of the communal “we”

In scientific writing, the majority of articles are written by more than one author. As a result, “we” means “I and the other authors.” Consequently, the communal “we,” which refers to “one” or “any reasonable person,” is rarely used.

Credit: Elissa Jacobs, University Writing Program, 2020.

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