Lesson 3: Academic Discourse  
Module 2: Structured Academic Writing

Welcome to *Accelerating Language Acquisition for Secondary English Language Learners*, Lesson 3: Academic Discourse. This is Module 2: Structured Academic Writing.

Throughout the lesson, we will guide you to particular pages in your workbook. You may access the workbook below the content window.

**Section 1: Connect and Get Information**

In previous lessons, we introduced the idea that academic language is like a tree, made up of academic vocabulary, represented by the leaves, and academic discourse, represented by the trunk and branches. Module 1 of this lesson covered oral (or spoken) discourse; Module 2 is about written discourse.

Remember, academic discourse is the connected language used in academic settings. It is made of the phrases, sentences, and paragraphs found in the lectures and written texts of content area classrooms.

In Lesson 3, Module 2, we will apply to writing the oral academic discourse practices we explored in the last module. We will explore how academic speaking and writing skills support one another, and we will learn more about the ways we can use these skills to enhance student understanding of content concepts.

The objectives of this module are to learn how to:

- structure writing activities that use academic language to enhance the quality of content instruction;
- help students construct written responses, using academic English;
- analyze the language needed to respond to an academic writing task; and,
- create sentence frames and response banks that support students at various proficiency levels.

The Texas College and Career Readiness Standards (or CCRS) provide information about the knowledge and skills that high school graduates need to succeed in their postsecondary education and careers. Take a moment to review the examples from writing expectations across the content areas.

Students are expected to practice writing in every content area in order to communicate their thinking
and demonstrate what they’ve learned.

**Section 2: Apply, Part 1**

When students practice academic writing in content area classes, they have the opportunity to develop the language they will encounter in textbooks, assessments, and advanced studies. In this module, we will look at two kinds of writing to incorporate in content area lessons on a regular basis:

- Brief writing activities that can be used frequently; and
- Longer, more extensive writing tasks

In brief writing tasks, students succinctly articulate the key concepts they are learning.

Responses should be a complete sentence or two, usually enough to fit on a sticky note.

A brief writing task may be assigned at any point during a lesson, allowing students to process their thinking and reveal their understanding of the content at that point.

In the previous module, we witnessed Ms. Clark lead her class in spoken academic discourse on the types and functions of organelles within a cell. To prepare her students for that discussion, she first assigned them a brief writing task: a worksheet on which students could articulate key concepts in short, complete sentences. You can find a copy of this worksheet and its answer key in your workbook.

Now, let’s take a look at how Ms. Clark prepared this brief writing task.

She began with the same guide questions you learned in the previous lesson.

**MS. CLARK:** I consider, first: What do I want students to be able to say in writing about this concept? Then: What would a correct student response look like? And finally: What language support do students need to produce the response—in this case, in writing?

Copies of these planning guide questions are reprinted in your workbook.

Using guide question 1, Ms. Clark determines she wants students to state the function of each organelle. To encourage academic discourse, she will ask them to use complete sentences.

Prompted by guide question 2, Ms. Clark prepares a written sample response for her brief writing task.

**MS. CLARK:** “The function of the lysosome is to break down discarded proteins.” Another way of writing that is: “Lysosomes break down discarded proteins.” I give the students these two options so they can practice using both and have more variety in their writing.

What language support do students need to produce the response?
Ms. Clark decides to use sentence frames—the same support she used for the spoken activity in the previous module.

Look at Ms. Clark’s sample responses. Click to underline the words you think should become sentence frame blanks. Click Ready when you’re done.

Here is what Ms. Clark underlined.

The next step is to create the sentence frame, using the blanks and providing the clues for students to fill them. Take a moment to create your clues. Click Ready when you’re done.

Here are Ms. Clark’s clues.

Take a quick look at the second sample response.

MS. CLARK: In the second sample response, I also added an extra support: a clue to show how the sentence may change, depending on whether the subject is singular or plural. This helps ELLs at the beginning and intermediate levels to increase their grammatical accuracy in English.

Let’s watch as Ms. Clark presents the first sentence frame her students will use in their brief writing task: completing an organelle chart.

In your workbook, find “Classroom Observation: Brief Writing Task.” Write down the steps Ms. Clark takes to provide support for her students.

MS. CLARK: Students, we have learned about the functions that are performed in a cell. Do you remember some of them?

STUDENT: Regulate.

STUDENT: Break down.

STUDENT: Generate.

MS. CLARK: That’s right. We have those functions listed over on our word wall, with the cards from our cell game. Now, we are going to learn more about the structures that perform those functions in the cell. Those structures are called organelles. Let’s say that word together a couple times.

STUDENTS and MS. CLARK: Or-gan-elle: organelle.

MS. CLARK: Great. Now, you will explore more about these organelles. As you learn, I want you use your chart to write complete sentences about the organelles. To help with that, we have a sentence frame—like ones we have used in the past, right? Let’s take a look at this one. The sentence starts like this: “The function of the” blank “is to” blank.
As you can see, I will be filling in the blanks, using these clue words below to help me find the right word or phrase to complete the sentence. I am going to start with the example on the chart, which is an organelle called the lysosome. The function of the... here I need to write the name of the organelle, lysosome.

Is to...and here I need to write a verb and a phrase to tell the function.

So, I’ll look at my materials and read what it says about the function of the lysosome. That sounds like one of our function cards over here. Here it is: to break down discarded proteins. I’ll take that information and write it on this blank. I have a verb, break down, plus, what does it break down? Discarded proteins. That completes the phrase that tells the function of the structure. So, the complete sentence is “The function of the lysosomes is to break down discarded proteins.” Let’s see if I did that correctly. Did I name the organelle?

STUDENTS: Yes.

MS. CLARK: Yes. Right here, lysosome. And do I complete the sentence with a verb and phrase to tell its function?

STUDENTS: Yes.

MS. CLARK: Yes. That’s right here. I wrote, “break down discarded proteins.” I wrote the sentence here on the class chart. Now, it’s your turn to explore your materials to find the different organelles listed on your charts.

This chart will be your graphic organizer for the activity. So, what is your job?

STUDENT: To work with our group.

STUDENT: To find out about each organelle.

MS. CLARK: Yes. You will need to work together and find out: Is this organelle found in plant cells, animal cells, or both? Note that here on your chart. What is its function? Remember to look at the word wall for words we used in the cell game. They can help you understand the information in your materials and write complete sentences. Ready? OK, begin exploring with your group.

Here are some of the ways we saw Ms. Clark support her students in this video:

• She presented the sentence frame as a response to the writing task;

• She read the sentence frame aloud several times; and

• She rewrote the completed frame on the graphic organizer to look like a real sentence.

In earlier videos, we witnessed Ms. Clark:
• Pointing out possible variations in the frames; and

• Emphasizing elements that would help ELLs write grammatically accurate English, including subject-verb agreement and correct use of articles

This brief academic writing task—the organelle chart—provides a foundation for the oral classroom discussions later in Ms. Clark’s organelle lesson.

By using grammatically correct sentences to complete this chart, Ms. Clark’s students have practiced the academic writing skills that will serve their academic discussions later in the lesson.

Remember, brief academic writing tasks allow students to succinctly articulate key concepts, using academic language. Whether you are a science teacher like Ms. Clark—or a math, social studies, or language arts teacher—you can incorporate brief academic writing tasks in your lessons.

Brief writing tasks can take various forms, such as writing information on graphic organizers, in student notebooks, on sticky notes, or on index cards.

Brief writing assignments serve well as informal assessments. You can ask your students to turn in a brief synthesis at the end of class or use the task as a checkpoint during the lesson to assess students’ understanding of key concepts.

You might also ask students to share their written responses as part of an activity, like Ms. Clark did. Many students benefit from having the time to compose a written response—with the support of a sentence frame—before sharing their thoughts aloud.

Section 3: Apply, Part 2

Extensive writing tasks usually require one or more paragraphs to synthesize key concepts, explain connections, or describe relationships in content topics.

Students may use materials and resources from the lesson, such as graphic organizers, research, and other notes.

Students may also benefit from a speaking activity that provides time to brainstorm a topic with peers or enhance understanding before they begin to write.

Ms. Davis will now present an extensive writing task to her science class.

MS. DAVIS: You have done good work gathering information and writing sentences about the function of the organelles. Next, you will have an opportunity to write more extensively about what you know. Look up here at the board. Who would like to read the writing assignment for us?

LELA: “How do plant and animal cells differ? How are they alike? Why?”
MS. DAVIS: Thank you, Lela. So, class, your job is to write your response to these questions in paragraph form. I’m going to give you 5 minutes to discuss with your group what you might write in a paragraph to answer those questions. After you discuss, you will have time to write.

MS. DAVIS: All right, everyone. I heard some good discussions. That should help you with your paragraphs. You can also use the notes on your charts that tell about the organelles and their functions to help write the paragraph. Remember, good, complete sentences that answer these questions: “How do plant and animal cells differ? How are they alike? Why?” Write your response in paragraph form. I’ll be available to help if you need anything.

You will now help Ms. Davis analyze her students’ written work.

Here is the work of one of Ms. Davis’s ELL students, Sandra, who came to the United States in fifth grade. Her TELPAS writing score indicates that she was writing at the Intermediate level in English in the spring of last year.

The two teachers, Ms. Clark and Ms. Davis, will look at Sandra’s work together. Ms. Clark first asks Ms. Davis to determine what knowledge of the content the student expressed in this written assignment.

The task was to identify similarities and differences between plant and animal cells.

Take a moment to highlight the words and phrases that demonstrate the student’s knowledge of the content. Click a word or phrase once if it describes a similarity. Click twice if it describes a difference. Click again to return the word or phrase to normal.

Click Ready when you’re done.

Here is Ms. Davis’s assessment.

MS. DAVIS: I can see she has some clear understanding of similarities and differences between plant and animal cells. She is able to express five things the cells have in common and one major difference.

MS. CLARK: That’s right. So that is what you will grade her on.

MS. DAVIS: Even though it is not in academic English?

MS. CLARK: Well, let’s remember a couple things about that. First, your grades need to reflect what she knows about science, about your content objective. But also, you didn’t teach her how to use academic language in this lesson, so it would not be appropriate to grade students on that.

MS. DAVIS: I guess that’s true. I hadn’t thought about it that way before.
MS. CLARK: But we are going to look at language here, too. This is an opportunity for us to learn from the students.

MS. DAVIS: OK, what do you mean?

MS. CLARK: Look again at the paper and underline where the student had inaccuracies in language use. This will help us understand what elements of academic English she needs help with.

Click a word once to mark it as part of a grammatical inaccuracy. Click again to return the word to normal.

Click Ready when you’re done.

Here is what Ms. Davis underlined. Ms. Clark agrees that these inaccuracies in English usage reflect Sandra’s limited writing proficiency in English, not her knowledge of science.

This student did her best to use the resources, but she did not have the English language fluency and knowledge to transfer the information from the chart to produce a grammatically accurate paragraph. It is difficult to determine whether she knew more about the content but was simply unable to express it in English. Later, we will see how Ms. Clark provides support for students like Sandra to be successful in this writing task.

Remember, when assessing student writing, grade for content knowledge and understanding. Content area grades should reflect a student’s mastery of the concepts, not his or her writing skills.

It is useful to analyze students’ use of academic language. Based on your analysis, you can create the language supports your students can use throughout their content area classes.

Analyzing the writing of students of limited English language proficiency can help determine whether language may have been a barrier to content learning or articulation of knowledge. The ELPS remind us that English learners need intentional instruction in academic English in all content areas.

As we’ll see in a moment, even more highly fluent and native English speakers can benefit from academic writing instruction.

Here is another example of writing by one of Ms. Davis’s students, Jacob, a native English speaker.

The phrases already highlighted here reflect content knowledge that was also expressed in Sandra’s writing sample. Take a moment to highlight the additional content information Jacob included.

Click Ready when you’re done.

MS. DAVIS: I see how this student discusses two additional differences, in the second paragraph. This student also explains the reasons for the differences in terms of the functions of the organelles.
MS. CLARK: Yes. And in looking at the language, we see this student is able to express the content knowledge without grammatical or English usage errors. But there is still a problem with the language, right?

MS. DAVIS: Well, yes. It is ... well, I don't know ... kind of informal. Right?

MS. CLARK: Exactly. Let's look at it closely.

Look at the student writing sample again and take a moment to highlight the words and phrases that make Jacob's writing informal—that is, nonacademic.

Click Ready when you’re done.

MS. DAVIS: These highlighted words and phrases create an informal, conversational tone in this writing sample. That’s not what is expected in science class or other content area classes.

MS. CLARK: Yes, and he also writes fragments beginning with but, and, or although, in ways that may be acceptable in conversation but not in standard writing.

MS. DAVIS: It is kind of creative, but it doesn’t match the assignment—maybe in a creative writing class but not in science. For this writing task, the expectation is for academic language.

MS. CLARK: Yes, students need models and writing supports so they can produce the kind of writing that is expected in science courses at the secondary and college levels.

Section 4: Apply, Part 3

Ms. Clark invites her mentee, Ms. Davis, to observe as she introduces an extensive writing task to her students.

Find “Classroom Observation: Extensive Writing Task” in your workbook. List everything you notice Ms. Clark doing to prepare her ELLs and English fluent students for this task.

MS. CLARK: Class, we have learned a lot about plant and animal cells, their organelles, and their functions. We recorded information on our charts, using complete sentences, and everyone had opportunities to practice describing the organelles like a scientist would, by telling other group members about the functions of the organelles. Now it is time to elaborate on what you’ve learned. The task is to write one or two paragraphs that answer the question. Who can read the elaboration question, please? Jorge?

JORGE: “How do plant and animal cells differ? How are they alike? Why?”

MS. CLARK: Great. But before we begin writing about the similarities and differences between plant and animal cells, we will set up expectations. First, your paragraphs should include examples of at least two ways plant and animal cells are different and at least two ways
they are similar—so, two differences, two similarities, OK? And remember how we practiced writing like scientists? How do we do that?

STUDENT: With the science words.

STUDENT: In complete sentences.

MS. CLARK: Exactly. And where can we find the information we need to help us write in complete sentences?

STUDENT: Our charts that we did, with the organelles and the functions.

MS. CLARK: Yes. You already wrote out some complete sentences about organelles, using the sentence frames. For example, this sentence frame reads: “Both plant and animal cells have” blank...an organelle goes here...“that” blank...a verb and phrase goes here.

Let’s see, both plant and animal cells have... Who can tell me one?

STUDENT: Nucleus?

MS. CLARK: Yes. That is a good example. I'll write “nucleus” on this blank. “Both plant and animal cells have a nucleus that” blank. I need a verb and phrase that describes the function. What does the chart say about the function of the nucleus?

ETTA: The nucleus stores the genetic information of the cell.

MS. CLARK: OK, so, for this blank, I'll write, “stores genetic material.” The verb is stores, and what does it store? Genetic material. So, the complete sentence is: “Both plant and animal cells have a nucleus that stores the genetic material for the cell.” Does that sentence tell how plant and animal cells are similar or different?

CYNTHIA: Similar.

MS. CLARK: And how did you know that, Cynthia?

CYNTHIA: Because it says “Both plant and animal cells...”

MS. CLARK: Yes. That is correct. Use this sentence frame for one way to express how cells are similar, using the word both.

Here is a separate sentence frame that you can use to talk about how the cells are different. I will give you time to practice using your charts and the sentence frames with your group before you start writing. Let’s start discussing.

MS. CLARK: Great. Your discussions should give you a good idea of what you will write in your
paragraphs. Let’s shift to writing time now. Remember, use your charts and the sentence frames. And include at least two differences and similarities.

Here are some of the practices you may have noticed.

Ms. Clark provided clear expectations in the assignment—specifically, asking students to include at least two similarities and two differences in their paragraphs. Clarifying expectations is especially helpful for English learners and helps ensure better writing and a more useful assessment for all students.

Ms. Clark modeled how to use the information on the charts to complete the sentence frames. You may recall how Ms. Davis’s student Sandra used information from her chart but did not have the English writing proficiency to correctly compose a paragraph in academic English without support. Many students need to be shown how to transfer information from graphic organizers to written prose.

Finally, Ms. Clark built this task upon earlier structured oral and written tasks. You will remember from earlier videos that students first worked together to gather information from their materials and then participated in a structured discussion task to describe the function of each organelle. Then in this video, Ms. Clark asked them to practice using their charts to complete sentence frames to help articulate similarities and differences in cells. This provided the students practice in using academic language to describe content in discussion before writing it on their own.

Ms. Clark planned this extensive writing lesson by using the three guide questions, just as she did in planning the oral discussion and brief academic writing.

MS. CLARK: Question 1 asks: “What do I want students to be able to say about this concept?”

The writing prompt is: “How do plant and animal cells differ? How are they alike? Why? Write your response in paragraph form.”

With the guidance of question 2, Ms. Clark wrote a sample response, using the completed organelle chart as a resource. Take a moment to read her sample.

MS. CLARK: The standard tells us what students need to know, but we need more specific criteria for evaluating their knowledge. I used my sample response paragraphs to clarify the criteria for success. Once I wrote it out for myself, I could clearly see what it looked like for students to include two examples of similarities and two differences. I came up with more, and some of my students might as well, but the benchmark will be two examples of each.

Guide question 3 asks: “What language support do students need to produce the response?”

MS. CLARK: In creating supports for students, I always look at vocabulary. In this case, the students have learned the content vocabulary in an earlier activity. They have already worked out how to describe the functions in complete sentences on their charts, so they can use those in formulating the paragraphs. But I will have to show them how.
So next, I analyzed the sentence structure. I focused on the sentences where the content “answers” were embedded. Just like I have done for speaking and for brief writing tasks, I underlined the content information that students would need to know, and that could vary.

I created sentence frames for expressing two kinds of information: similarities and differences, or compare and contrast. Since this was the heart of the writing task, I knew I would need to show students how to articulate that in academic English.

Let’s take a closer look at how Ms. Clark created the sentence frame you saw modeled in the classroom video.

First, she identified a sentence from her sample paragraph that presented pertinent content information.

Next, she looked for content that could be turned into a blank in the frame. She underlined “nucleus” and “stores the genetic information of the cell” because this is the content information that she is looking for students to show and that will vary as students describe different organelles.

The nonunderlined part of the sentence represents the academic discourse. This is a framework for students to use academic English when demonstrating content knowledge. It’s not giving away the answers. Instead, this framework provides structured support for writing—something that would benefit students like Sandra, for example, who are at beginning or intermediate levels of English proficiency and require such scaffolds to successfully participate in grade-level academic writing.

The final step in creating sentence frames is to label the blanks with clues or guide words about terms or parts of speech.

Try this one. Write the clues underneath the blanks to help students know how to construct those parts of the sentence. Remember to consider variations that students might have and still express the concept with accurate academic English.

Click Ready when you’re done.

Here are Ms. Clark’s answers.

Now it’s your turn to create a sentence frame. Because Ms. Clark’s students will need to know how to express differences in order to complete the writing task, this time we’ll use a sentence that highlights contrasting information.

Here is the second paragraph from Ms. Clark’s sample response. Take a moment to read it, paying particular attention to the sentence in bold.

Click Ready when you’re done.

The sentence in bold states a difference between plant and animal cells. Let’s use it to make a sentence frame.
First, underline the content that will vary.

Click Ready when you’re done.

Here are Ms. Clark’s answers. Remember, the underlined phrases represent the content knowledge that students must express and that will vary. The nonunderlined words and phrases represent the sentence structure for communicating this content knowledge in academic English.

Now, label the blanks appropriately.

Click Ready when you’re done.

Here are Ms. Clark’s answers.

MS. CLARK: I use response banks a lot—especially in the speaking and brief writing tasks. For this extensive writing assignment, they were able to use their charts. Because they had already written out the functions in complete sentences, I was able to show them how to use this as their response bank and convert those sentences into the clauses of the comparison or contrast sentences. So the chart served as a response bank for students who needed that support.

My fluent and advanced English speakers tend to use the sentence frames as they need them. They can formulate sentences on their own, too, but the frames help reinforce the use of academic versus everyday language. I also see that the frames point students toward my expectations. For example, students see in the comparison frame that they have to include information about the function of the organelle. So it is much more than just filling in the blanks.

Having a couple sample sentence frames to compare and contrast really gets students going. My intermediate students really latch on to them and use them almost exclusively. Their paragraphs are still a bit choppy sometimes, but they are getting good practice using more complex language, and I see improvement over time as they build their repertoire of academic phrases and sentence constructions.

Most Texas secondary teachers—whether in math, social studies, language arts, or science—encounter students at the beginning level of English proficiency.

Teachers like Ms. Clark and Ms. Davis know these students bring a variety of experiences and cultural assets to the classroom and are dedicated to helping students learn science content in a language that is new to them. Ms. Clark has invited Ms. Davis to observe Ms. Clark’s classes with the most beginning students and note what she does to support those students.

In this video, Ms. Davis meets with Ms. Clark to discuss those observations.

MS. CLARK: Let’s talk about what you observed.

MS. DAVIS: OK, for starters, I noticed how you took a moment to review the meaning of the word
both when you were introducing the organelle chart. And when the students were preparing for their writing task, I saw how you reviewed other important Tier I words, like similar and different. You checked for understanding by asking students for examples.

MS. CLARK: Yes. Remember, Tier I words are common words but still new to beginners learning English. What else?

MS. DAVIS: I saw that you checked in with the beginning ELLs often to make sure they were getting it.

MS. CLARK: Yes. I do that throughout the class. Another thing I do that provides support for beginners is to let them prepare for the content in their native language. I have a translation program on my computer, and the students come in before or after school to preview. It isn’t perfect, but it helps them have an understanding of the lesson before they hear it in English in class.

MS. DAVIS: Great Idea. I also noticed that you encouraged students to check with bilingual classmates during the writing activities, and I saw some students using dictionaries.

MS. CLARK: Yes. And if you need dictionaries, just talk to Ms. Garza or the librarian.

MS. DAVIS: Thanks. I also noticed you slightly modified the task for the beginners.

MS. CLARK: Yes—just slightly. They still needed to write two similarities and two differences, but I asked them to just write four sentences. Then, I let the beginner students discuss together the “why” part of the prompt, to be prepared to answer orally. I know they don’t yet have the academic English skills to put those complex ideas in writing on their own, but I want them to think it through and discuss it.

MS. DAVIS: You know, what really struck me was how you were able to give more attention to the beginner students, while the other students got to work writing independently. I saw how you helped the beginners use the sentence frames.

MS. CLARK: Yes. The structure provided to all students in the lesson creates opportunities for more advanced students to work independently, freeing up time for me to give extra guidance to the beginning English students. Plus, the materials we’ve created like the cell models and the charts provide visuals that also help scaffold learning for the ELLs.

MS. DAVIS: This really helped. Now I have some concrete things I can do to support the beginning ELLs in my class. Thanks.

To support beginning English learners, Ms. Clark:

- Clarifies important Tier I words;
- Checks in frequently for content comprehension;
• Uses native language support, as appropriate;
• Reduces the amount of writing required in a given time; and
• Provides more structured support and guidance

Throughout Lesson 3, we have observed Ms. Clark using the three planning guide questions to plan instruction in the use of academic language.

Let’s listen in as Ms. Clark and Ms. Davis reflect on the value of teaching academic writing.

MS. DAVIS: I know that my students need to be able to write, but somehow, I didn’t really think about the fact that I needed to be the one to teach it, to model it, and show them how to write about science.

MS. CLARK: You are not alone. It was not obvious to me, either. But I have seen the results: better work from my students on their lab reports and other written assignments, more participation in class, and, ultimately, better understanding of the science concepts we study.

MS. DAVIS: I like the fact that I can take the guesswork out of assessment. When I teach the language and provide the support, my students are able to show me what they know and don’t know about science, so I can adjust my teaching accordingly.

MS. CLARK: It is an investment in time, for sure—in preparation and in class, especially when you first start. But the payoff is worth it. With the rigor that is expected of students these days, we cannot afford not to invest in their academic language.

Find the “Lesson 3, Module 2: Synthesis” page in your workbook.

Take a minute to think about how you could use the guide questions to structure and support academic writing in your classes.

**Section 5: Process**

In this module:

• You’ve seen several examples of how to structure writing activities to enhance the quality of content instruction;
• You’ve learned and practiced how to create supports for students as they construct written responses in academic English;
• And you have analyzed language needed to respond to an academic writing task.
• You have also had the opportunity to create sentence frames and response banks that support
students at various proficiency levels.

Now it’s time to review the key elements of academic discourse. Drag and drop each term to match its corresponding example. For a definition of each term, hover your cursor over the term.

You have completed Lesson 3. Proceed to the quiz to finish the course and receive a certificate of completion.