

# Academic Writing in the Humanities

---

Sharing what I know – which is not a lot

# What is academic writing?

---

- Writing in a formal academic setting with its own sets of **rules** and **practices**
- A **formal** order or structure in which to present **ideas**, form an **argument**, and reach a **conclusion**, original or otherwise
- Primarily surrounds research, theoretical/practical application, and the in-depth exploration of a particular topic or title



# Difference between academic writing and personal writing

---

- Tone
- Certain structure
- Specific audience
- Different to writing meeting minutes, or a novel, or a poem, or a diary entry
- Deals with abstract concepts or the application of theoretical approaches

# Varying Disciplines

---

## Abstract

- Philosophy
- History
- Literature

## Mixture

- Geography
- Economics
- Politics

## Practical

- Science
- Engineering
- Medicine

# Tone and language

---

- The “tone” of an academic paper is usually formal
- Conventional approach with regards to punctuation and word choice
- Clichés, platitudes, slang, abbreviations, and complex jargon should be avoided
- Third person (usually) – objectivity



# Tone and language

---

## Example 1

- The concept of “sympathy” is core to Adam Smith’s explanation, and is essential to his position which posits that moral sentiments are the basis for morality and contribute to a “harmonious social order.”

## Example 2

- “Sympathy” is a big part of Adam Smith’s philosophy, and he says that moral sentiments make a “harmonious social order.”

# Tone and language

---

- Clear, concise, and coherent writing
- Avoid personal pronoun ('I') – depends on discipline and context
- Precision and clarity
- Writing style – verbosity/brevity/terseness

# Tone and language

---

## Example 1

- It can be argued that John Rawls' theory lacks persuasion because it neglects the human condition. It is too idealistic as he demands that those who are better off in a social and natural sense must work harder in order to compensate those who are least well off.

## Example 2

- I think that John Rawls' theory sucks because it neglects the human condition. It is bad because he demands that those who are better off in a social and natural sense must work harder in order to compensate those who are least well off.



# Concise

- Fancy language only works in specific circumstances (thesaurus is your friend – to an extent)

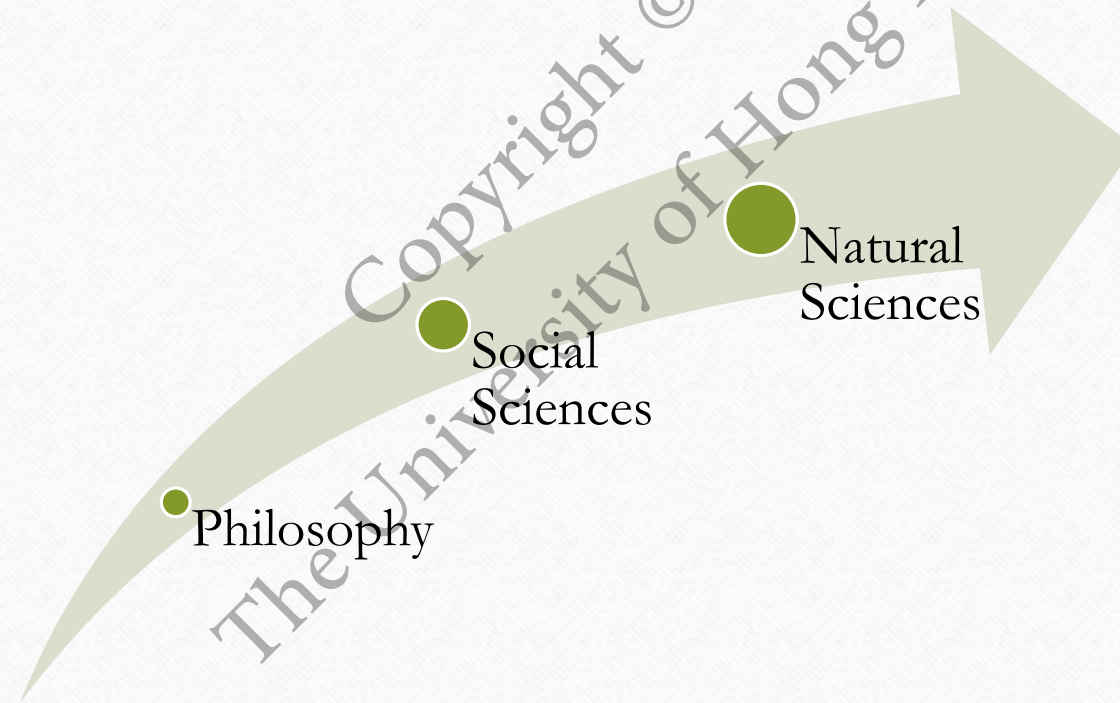
“According to Marx, the bourgeoisie eradicated the more idealistic characteristics such as religious fervour and philistine (thesaurus synonym: barbarian) sentimentalism, replacing them with egotistical (thesaurus synonym: vainglorious) calculation.”

- Short, **concise** sentences which are not repetitive or unnecessarily long

“As ~~every attentive speaker essentially means everyone in society~~ is an attentive speaker, Adam Smith essentially suggests that there is a standardized, natural response to every single action and situation.”

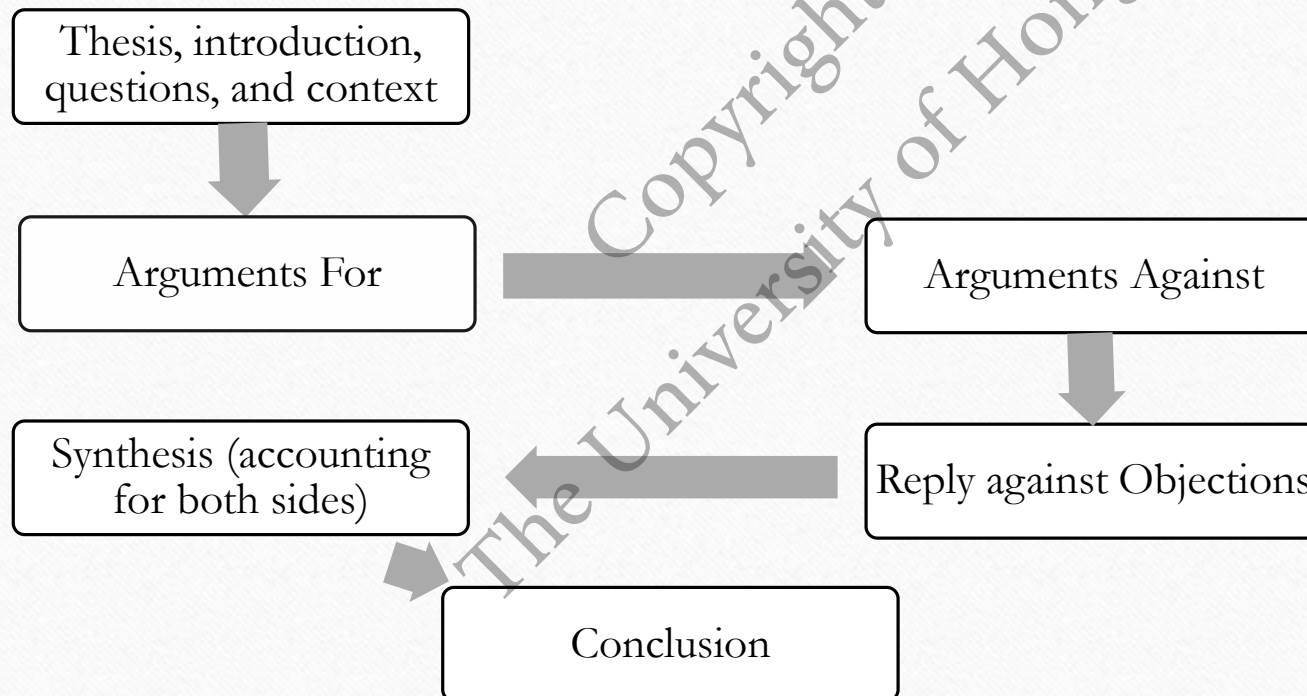
# Objectivity

---





# Structure



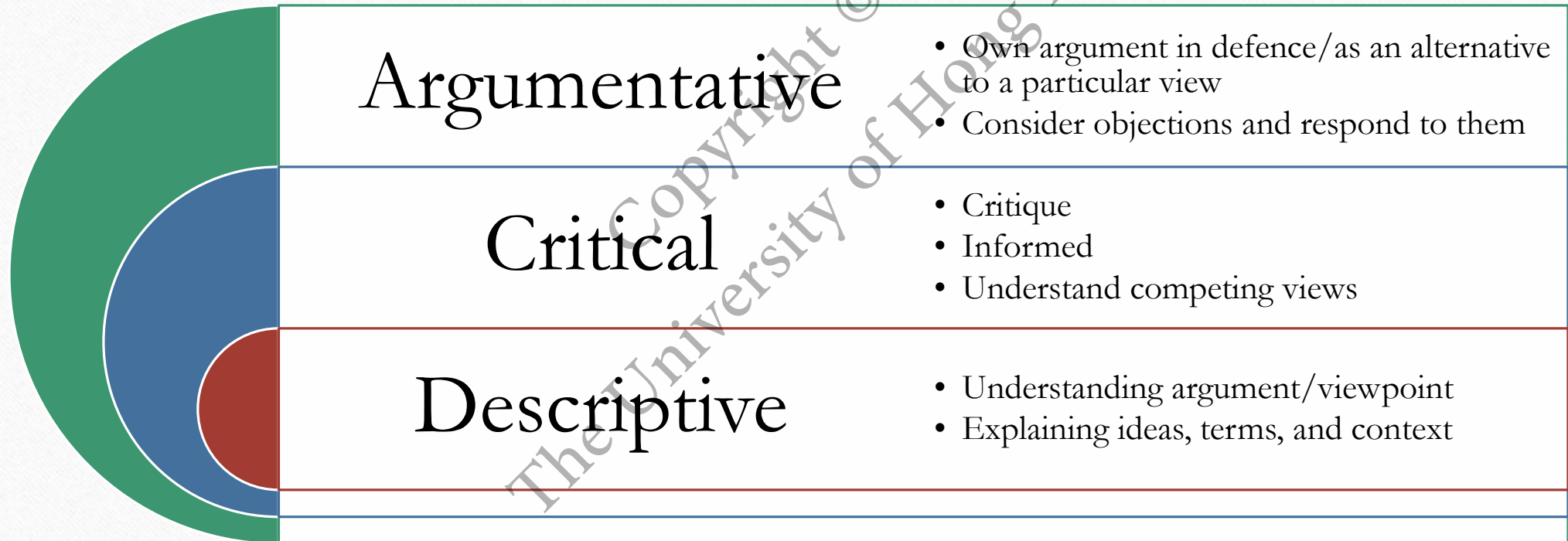
# Audience

---

- Be aware of audience – define terms, explain ideas, expound complex theories, approaches and ideas
- The audience aren't idiots – but don't **assume** the “obvious”
- Intelligent, well-read individuals who want to know about the topic
- Not here to read a story, or assess your rhetoric skills



# Purpose



# My own experience

---

- Flashy language and clear use of thesaurus
- One sentence paragraphs
- No conclusion
- Italics
- Superfluous sentences – “*throughout the past millennia, the notion of free will has long been a subject of intense debate which has plagued mankind and philosophers alike.*”



## The problem with italics

1. this paper assumes it *is* a legitimate question to ask, and it seeks to evaluate three justifications of why one should be moral, namely: (1) the *achievement* approach; (2) Hurka's notion of *virtue*; and (3) Professor Kagan's *practical reality* argument.

---

2. When one strikes to become a moral person, the first-level development of one's inner moral self is *not merely a by-product*, but a *significant part* of one's achievement.

3. Hurka further argued that virtue is a good thing *located in one's life*, and therefore *makes that person's life better from his self-interested perspective*.

# Do's and don't's

---

- **Do:** write clearly and precisely
- **Do:** present your view in a way that demonstrates you are well-read, an expert, and know your stuff inside out
- **Do:** argue for both sides strongly (**don't** deliberately pick a weak counterargument from opposition) – the better the opposition is, the better your essay looks
- **Don't** be overly flamboyant with writing style
- **Don't** skip proof reading – grammar and tense mistakes are more infuriating than bad arguments
- **Don't** plagiarize



# How to improve

---

- Read, Read, Read...
- Practice
- Plan
- Read some more

Copyright ©  
The University of Hong Kong

# Reading and understanding

---

- Dissecting arguments → identify theses, schools of thought, and conclusions
- Identify evidence, conclusions, and the link between these
- Different views
- Logic of the argument – validity; soundness

Writing

---

Opinion

Argument

Content