

Writing in Spatial Planning: Academic vs. Professional Styles

Spatial planners face the dual challenge of writing academic papers and engaging more widely with the public. By writing academically and professionally, they have to navigate complex spaces of analysis, communication, and decision-making.

Questions to consider

➤ What type of writing do I need to do as a spatial planner?

Reflect on your skills as they apply to writing academic course papers, scholarly articles, professional documents and reports for non-expert audiences, and job market documents (cover letters, internship applications, resumes, etc.).

➤ Do I understand the difference between these types of writing?

These differences are defined primarily by the type of audience you write to and the purpose of the document. Compare the examples of academic and professional style:

To describe the outcome of a community meeting:

Academic style: 'The participatory planning process revealed a statistically significant preference among residents for increased pedestrian infrastructure and green spaces.'

Professional style: 'Residents strongly support *more* walkable streets and parks. More than 75% of survey respondents ranked these as top priorities.' (*The Urban Planner's Writing Club*)

➤ How do I write about complex professional topics in a way that is understood by non-professionals?

To connect to your audience, (1) start off at the point they understand, (2) explain difficult terms, introduce your concepts and ideas with examples, and incorporate maps and infographics, (3) explain impact and benefits, and (4) use specific, concise, and simple language, such as in "safe play areas for children" used instead of "passive recreation areas" (*The Urban Planner's Writing Club*).

➤ Do I know how to use tables and figures effectively to make a point?

Begin by writing early in your research or professional project. Do not postpone writing until later, but instead write up your data by putting it into figures and tables. Doing so helps recognize patterns and trends you need to make a point and tell a compelling story.

wissenschaftlich . schreiben . präsentieren . academic . communication

For *academic* and *research* papers, find a chapter on tables and figures in a style guide you adhere to. Consider the chapter from the APA Guide to Style: <https://apastyle.apa.org/style-grammar-guidelines/tables-figures>

For *professional* documents and reports, create a list of best practices and user-centered design principles, such as spelled out on the Purdue OWL website: https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/subject_specific_writing/professional_technical_writing/effective_workplace_writing/index.html

or on the Urban Planner’s Writing Club website: <https://urbanplannerswritingclub.substack.com/p/perfect-those-tables>

Summary of best practices for creating readable tables

Step	Action	Direction
1	Decide on what’s most important from the reader’s perspective.	The most important info usually goes first.
2	Be descriptive with your column headings and the table’s title.	Get rid of the “filler words” – be concise.
3	Be consistent.	Use the same naming conventions. If you start with a verb once, do the same for all.
4	Clean up the symbols.	Put the symbols in the column heading, not on every line.
5	Make it even easier to read.	Simple formatting is best. Don’t overpower the information with the design elements.

➤ Should I ask ChatGPT?

For writing *academic* and *research* papers, adhere to the policies established by your university, department, or a journal you’re targeting (see our handout on AI-powered tools:

https://fs.zhb.tu-dortmund.de/storages/fs-zhb/r/Dokumente/Downloads_wspace/Handout_9_-_AI_and_writer.pdf

For writing *professional* documents and reports, consider Lisa Orchard’s advice:

My main caution

One of the reasons we write is because it helps us think through out ideas and professional opinions. You can take shortcuts and get AI to write for you – but that’s not going to help you develop the critical thinking skills you need to use, and demonstrate, on the job. You may be tempted to rely on it (who’s not under deadline?!) and if so, use it to generate the foundational work, maybe to give you a kick start – not to do the whole job for you. It may help in a crunch but it won’t help you in the long term. (<https://urbanplannerswritingclub.substack.com/p/making-ai-work-for-you>)

wissenschaftlich . schreiben . präsentieren . academic . communication

References and further reading

American Psychological Association (n.d.). *APA Style*. Tables and Figures.
<https://apastyle.apa.org/style-grammar-guidelines/tables-figures>

Kousoulas, C. D. (2020). *Writing for planners: A handbook for students and professionals in writing, editing, and document production*. Routledge.

Orchard, Lisa D. (n.d.). *The Urban Planner's Writing Club*.
<https://urbanplannerswritingclub.substack.com/>

Purdue OWL (n.d.). *Rhetorical Awareness and User-Centered Design*.
https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/subject_specific_writing/professional_technical_writing/effective_workplace_writing/index.html

Miami University (n.d.). *Writing in Geography and Urban Planning*. <https://miamioh.edu/howe-center/hwc/writing-resources/disciplinary-writing-guides/geography-urban-planning.html>

wissenschaftlich . schreiben . präsentieren . academic . communication