

1.20 Academic writing style

There's no great mystique about an "academic writing style". The most important thing is to keep your writing clear and concise and make sure that you get your ideas over in a comprehensible form. It's clear expression of these ideas that will impress your tutor, not a string of long, inappropriate words found in your dictionary. A wide range of vocabulary is of course important, but you must use the right word, and shorter ones are often better than longer ones.

The most important thing to remember is generally to try to avoid everyday, informal language, especially colloquial expressions and slang. Also, spoken language is naturally full of hesitations, repetitions, grammatical errors and unfinished ideas. In your writing, however, structure is much more important: sentences should be complete and ideas arranged into paragraphs or sections, and you should aim for perfection in your grammar and spelling. However, especially if English is not your first language, don't become too obsessed with this, to the point perhaps of copying word for word from your sources. What's important is that you clearly show your understanding of the subject and your ability to manipulate information to answer a specific question or complete a specific task, and as long as any grammar errors you make don't impede this, then it shouldn't be a problem.

Here are a few general points to remember when you are writing your assignments. As well as using appropriate language and aiming for 100% accuracy in your grammar and vocabulary, you should also remember that you're writing for someone else, and hence the importance of punctuation, sentences, paragraphs and overall structure, all of which help the reader.

AVOID SOME ASPECTS OF INFORMAL ENGLISH

- don't (do not!) use contractions (eg it's, he'll, it'd etc): always use the full form (it is/has, he will, it would/had).
- don't use colloquial language or slang (eg kid, a lot of/lots of, cool)
- always write as concisely as you can, with no irrelevant material or "waffle".
- generally avoid "phrasal verbs" (e.g. get off, get away with, put in etc): instead, use one word equivalents.
- avoid common but vague words and phrases such as get, nice, thing. Your writing needs to be more precise.
- avoid overuse of brackets; don't use exclamation marks or dashes; avoid direct questions; don't use "etc".
- always use capital letters appropriately and never use the type of language used in texting!

See the practice exercises at the end of the guide.

STRUCTURE YOUR WRITING CAREFULLY

- make sure you write in complete sentences (see Guide 1.34).
- divide your writing up into paragraphs (see Guide 1.35).
- use connecting words and phrases to make your writing explicit and easy to follow (see Guide 1.39).
- check your grammar and spelling carefully (see Guide 1.42).

MAKE YOUR WRITING FORMAL AND IMPERSONAL

- avoid too much personal language (I, my, we etc). Some tutors prefer you to avoid it completely. Never use emotive language; be objective rather than subjective. (See Guide 1.22).
- avoid being too dogmatic and making sweeping generalisations. It is usually best to use
- some sort of "hedging" language (see below) and to qualify statements that you make.
- you should consistently use evidence from your source reading to back up what you are saying and reference this correctly.
- avoid sexist language, such as chairman, mankind. Don't refer to "the doctor" as he; instead, make the subject plural and refer to them as *they*. Avoid he/she, herself/himself etc.
- use nominalisation; that is, try to write noun-based phrases rather than verb-based ones.

For example, instead of

Crime was increasing rapidly and the police were becoming concerned.

Write:

The rapid increase in crime was causing concern among the police.

In general, academic writing tends to be fairly dense, with relatively long sentences and wide use of subordinate clauses. Remember, however, that your main aim is clarity, so don't be too ambitious, particularly when you're starting to write.

HEDGING/AVOIDING COMMITMENT

In order to put some distance between what you're writing and yourself as writer, to be cautious rather than assertive, you should:

- avoid overuse of first person pronouns (I, we, my, our)
- use impersonal subjects instead (It is believed that ..., it can be argued that ...)
- use passive verbs to avoid stating the 'doer' (Tests have been conducted)
- use verbs (often with it as subject) such as imagine, suggest, claim, suppose
- use 'attitudinal signals' such as apparently, arguably, ideally, strangely, unexpectedly.
- These words allow you to hint at your attitude to something without using personal language.
- use verbs such as would, could, may, might which 'soften' what you're saying.
- use qualifying adverbs such as some, several, a minority of, a few, many to avoid making overgeneralisations.

Exercises

Exercise 1

Replace the phrasal verbs in the sentences with a more appropriate verb from the list below. Don't forget to keep the same tense.

fluctuate investigate eliminate raise reduce
propose intervene establish

- 1 Researchers have been looking into the problem for 15 years. _____
- 2 This issue was brought up during the seminar. _____
- 3 It is assumed that the management knows what is happening and will therefore step in if there is a problem. _____
- 4 Schools cannot altogether get rid of the problem of truancy. _____
- 5 The number of staff has been cut down recently. _____
- 6 It was very difficult to find out exactly what happened. _____
- 7 House prices have a tendency to go up and down. יר _____
- 8 A potential solution was put forward two years ago. יר _____

Exercise 2

Replace the following phrasal verbs with a more formal single word.

- 1 The locals could not put up with the visitors from the city. _____
- 2 The decline was brought about by cheap imports. _____
- 3 The university is thinking about installing CCTV. _____
- 4 Sales are likely to drop off in the third quarter. _____
- 5 He went on speaking for over an hour. _____
- 6 The meeting was put off until December. _____
- 7 The cinema was pulled down ten years ago. _____
- 8 People have cut down on their consumption of beef. _____

Exercise 3

Which of the two alternatives in bold do you think is more appropriate in academic writing?

- 1 The government has made considerable/great progress in solving the problem.
- 2 We got/obtained excellent results in the experiment.
- 3 The results of lots of/numerous tests have been pretty good/encouraging.
- 4 A loss of jobs is one of the consequences/things that will happen if the process is automated.
- 5 The relationship between the management and workers is extremely/really important.
- 6 Some suggestions springing up from/arising from the study will be presented.

Exercise 4

Use a more formal word or phrase to replace those in bold.

- 1 The reaction of the officials was sort of negative. _____
- 2 The economic outlook is nice. _____
- 3 Car manufacturers are planning a get together to discuss their strategy.

- 4 The resulting competition between countries is good. _____
- 5 The economy is affected by things that happen outside the country.

- 6 She was given the sack because of her poor record. _____
- 7 The examination results were super. _____

Exercise 5

Replace the contractions in the following sentences with full forms where necessary.

- 1 The results weren't very encouraging. _____
- 2 We'll have to conduct another experiment. _____
- 3 She's been all around the world. _____
- 4 It's the best solution to the problem. _____
- 5 Our questionnaire shows that teachers aren't paid what they're worth.

- 6 His response was, "A job's a job; if it doesn't pay enough, it's a lousy job". _____
- 7 He'd rather announce the findings at the conference. _____

8 The department's approach didn't succeed. _____

Exercise 6

Suggest improvements to the following sentences to avoid use of "you" and "we".

1. You can apply the same theory of learning to small children.

2. You can only do this after the initial preparation has been conducted.

3. The figures are accurate to within 1%, but you should note that local variations may apply.

4. In the second section of the report, we will consider the environmental consequences.

Exercise 7

Suggest alternatives to the following to avoid use of personal language.

1 In this essay I will discuss the main differences between the English and Scottish legal systems.

2 I have divided my report into five sections.

3 I will conclude by proposing that all drugs should be legalized.

4 The opinion of the present author in this essay is that the importance of the monarchy should be reduced.

5 In the third part of the essay, we will look at the reasons for public hysteria over the SARS virus

6 Although I am not an expert in the field, I have tried very hard to understand the main ideas.

Exercise 8

Make these statements more cautious.

1 Today everyone uses credit cards for all their shopping.

2 Drinking wine is bad for you.

3 Global warming will have disastrous consequences for the whole world.

4 Teleworking leads to isolation.

5 Women are worse drivers than men.

Exercise 9

Rewrite the following in a more formal style.

1. The positive feedback made up for the problems we came across during the trials.

2. You can clearly see the differences between these two learning processes.

3. The subjects didn't have much difficulty with the task.

4. We found example after example of autonomous systems in lots of countries.
