

# Basic Conventions of Academic Writing

## Establishing objectivity

Objectivity is a necessary quality of academic writing assignments. It refers to a deliberate distance between yourself as a writer and the subject matter of the assignment. It is established in various ways, e.g. avoiding the use of the first and second person, colloquial language, slang, contractions etc.

### Avoiding the first person

The first person is a grammatical term for using the words “I”, “we”, “us”, “ours”, etc. It is common in many kinds of writing (especially fiction) and in speech. Academic writing is very different – its aim is not to entertain or inform in a popular way, but to make an argument that engages with the academic discussion on a subject. Therefore, the use of the first person should be avoided (completely).

The main exception to the rule “do not use the first person in academic writing” is the “reflective” writing.

### Avoiding the second person

The use of the second person (“you”, “your”, “yours”) is a way of directly addressing someone else. The second person should simply be completely avoided in all academic writing because, being an aspect of spoken English, it makes writing very informal.

Do not use the second person, and when removing it, do not simply replace it with the first person. Use the more objective third person instead.

### Avoiding colloquial language and slang

Academic writing is formal. Formality in academic writing does not come from deliberately writing difficult, complex sentences, or using complex words. It comes from making sure that no inappropriate informal language, such as slang, is used.

Using colloquial language or contractions, for example, makes writing seem subjective. This is because the reader will get the impression that you are less serious (and not thinking in an academic way) about your subject.

Additionally, in most cases, academic writing should be literal. This means that words and phrase used should operate according to their actual dictionary definitions.

The word “really” rarely adds anything to academic writing. The same goes for “very”.

Avoid using clichés. Clichés are common or stock phrases unique to a particular language, and overused in that language. Most clichés, a long time ago, were interesting ways of describing something, and have been used so often so as to become popular, and to lose their original effect. Many clichés in the English language are based on describing things in subjective ways, which should be avoided in academic writing.

### Avoiding emotive language

Emotive language is not only language that could be described as “emotional”. More than that, emotive language is used deliberately, to evoke an emotion in the reader. Emotive language tends to be subjective, similarly to colloquial language. The more one develops an objective writing style, the more naturally he/she will avoid emotive language.

Most emotive language appears as description. By avoiding descriptive language and only using it when absolutely necessary, one is reducing the risk of using emotive language. Avoiding exaggeration, and exaggerated description in particular, is the best tactic to avoid emotive language.

Academic writing involves making points based on evidence.

## **Avoiding contractions**

A “contraction” is one word, made up of two or more words that have been joined together. Some letters from the words are left out and replaced with an apostrophe.

The rule is simple: **do not use contractions in academic writing**.

## **Simplicity, clarity and conciseness**

**Writing simply, concisely and clearly is a key convention of academic writing**. Essentially, you should use as few words as possible to make a point (conciseness); these individual words should be as straightforward as they can be without being informal or inappropriate (simplicity); and they should be put together in a way that makes your point effective and easy-to-understand (clarity).

*Adapted from Alex Osmond's "Academic Writing and Grammar for Students", 2013.*