

## ACADEMIC WRITING STYLE TIPS

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Academic writing is different from other forms of writing. Take how these writing aid materials are written, for example: the tone is more relaxed and conversational than that you'd find in, for instance, a journal article. This is *not* an academic style of writing, and would not be acceptable in a seminar paper.

Reading academic literature and journal articles is a great way of understanding the language and style used in academic writing. However, if you're still unsure, below are a few tips to help you get a feel of what's expected of you when you're asked to write a academic paper, report or thesis.

### ■ Objectivity and conciseness

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Academic writing aims to be **objective** (unbiased, impartial) and **concise** (getting your point across using as few words as necessary).

You may have – in fact, hopefully you do have – your own thoughts and opinions on what you're researching. However, in an academic paper, the focus is not on personal experience, but **sound evidence** and **analysis**.

Most academic texts are written in the **passive voice**: it avoids personal pronouns such as “I”, “me” and “you”. (For more information on the passive voice, check out “**Active versus passive voice**” in this series). This is not to say that you can't use this kind of personal language at all. You just need to make sure that you keep your language and style formal.

Other ways in which to achieve this include:

- ▶ **don't contract your verb forms** (as demonstrated here): for example, use “do not” instead of “don't”
- ▶ **avoid colloquial language**: this means everyday language, like using “mum” instead of “mother”, or “TV” instead of “television”
- ▶ **be precise when using facts, figures and dates**: don't write “a lot of people” when you can write “30 million people”
- ▶ **try not show your personal opinion** through the words you use: so, avoid words like “luckily” or “unusually”
- ▶ **avoid clichés**: these phrases are very overused, for example, “diamond in the rough” or “the writing on the wall”
- ▶ **don't overuse “etc.”**: use “and” instead when writing lists
- ▶ **don't overuse exclamation marks (!), brackets(() and/or dashes (–)**
- ▶ **use capital letters suitably**: don't use them for EMPHASIS
- ▶ there are also a few words you should avoid, opting instead for more formal, concise alternatives:
  - **“like”**: use “for example” or “for instance”
  - **“thing”** and other such combinations: use “factor” or “element”
  - **“lots of”**: use “many” or “substantial amount”
  - **“little”** and **“big”**: use “small” and “large”
  - **“good”** and **“bad”**: use “positive” and “negative”

## ■ Varied vocabulary

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It can be boring for your reader to come across the same vocabulary throughout your writing. One way to avoid this is to use **synonyms**. Synonyms are words that have a similar meaning, but not necessarily the same. This is why it's important to ascertain that the meaning is close enough when swapping one word for another. Therefore, check all words you're unsure of in the dictionary first.

## ■ Complex sentences

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Academic writing is formed of more complex sentences than you'd use when speaking. This doesn't mean that you should sacrifice meaning and clarity for eight line sentences and six syllable words. In fact, simple sentences and words are encouraged to ensure conciseness. Just keep an eye on the language you use and how your paragraphs are constructed.

## ■ Language sensitivity

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Avoid using **absolute comments** and **generalizations**. So, instead of stating "All transnational corporations put their profits above respecting human rights", write "*There is evidence that many* transnational corporations put their profits above respecting human rights". This is also known as "hedging": using cautious language, e.g., "appear to be", "suggests", "possible", as opposed to "always", "never".

Also, avoid using **offensive language**, such as swear words. Using such language takes away from your objectivity and, in fact, weakens your case.

## ■ Unbiased language

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Language is one of the most powerful tools we have to convey meaning. As we've become more socially aware, so has how we use language. To avoid being offensive to certain groups of people, it's important to avoid **biased language**.

### ► Gender bias

One of the biggest issues is that of **gender bias**. For instance, assuming that the individual in question is male, e.g., writing "man" instead of "human", or stating "Every doctor should be legally bound not to hurt *his* patients".

One way to bypass using "he/she" is to use the plural form instead, i.e., "they", "their". So, instead of writing:

Today, for a farmer to apply for a grant, **he/she**...

You can write:

Today, for a farmer to apply for a grant, **they**...

Although this is a matter of contention in some writing circles – as you're using a plural for a singular case – it's more concise than continuously using "he/she", and, as people can also be gender non-specific, could also be considered as more accepting.

Gendered forms of words, for instance, "policeman" or "policewoman", can easily be changed to the **non-gendered form**: "police".

If you use old texts, such biased language might be unavoidable. In these circumstances, you should just quote as is or paraphrase.

► **Referring to different groups of people**

When referring to a person who, for instance, has a disability or is homeless, put their disability last. So, instead of “disabled person” write “a person *who is disabled*”, and instead of “homeless person” write “a person *who is homeless*”. This is because they’re people before their disability or situation.

Avoid writing groups of people as adjectives, e.g., females, gays, Asians. Instead, substitute for nouns: women, gay people, Asian people.

Make sure you use the **correct terminology**. Certain terms are outdated and can be offensive, e.g., “black” or “Indian” (as opposed to “native”). You should also be aware of your audience regarding this point. Try and be as precise as possible when referring to different groups. This will help you to avoid stereotypical terms.