Academic style

Writing and speaking academically

English in written academic tasks has a distinctive style; it is objective, formal and precise. The University expects you to express your findings and arguments in ‘academic style’. Every student can become more confident in using it – and better at it.

‘Academic style’ is more than just a convention – it can enable you to think more logically, more clearly and more realistically as you work on an assignment.

What is ‘academic style’?

The more important features of academic style include:

Objectivity
The goal of academic writing is to present and evaluate academic issues and to arrive at a position informed by research, not to present one’s own personal biases or preferences. For this reason, personal pronouns, especially ‘I’, ‘You’ and ‘We’ are often avoided.

However, avoiding ‘I’ does not mean you should merely report information. Your own evaluation of the material is extremely important, and can be made objective by the use of evidence or logical argumentation. For further information on this subject, see the Academic Skills flyer Voice in Academic Writing.

Structures that help to establish an objective ‘distance’ from the topic under discussion include the use of passive verbs, topic as subject and ‘it’ as an “empty subject”. Compare the following:

You can demonstrate that global warming is a real phenomenon by studying changes in Antarctic ice layers. (Informal / subjective)

Changes in Antarctic ice layers demonstrate that global warming is a real phenomenon (topic as subject)

The reality of Global warming can be demonstrated by studying changes in Antarctic ice layers (use of passive verb)

Another structure that can make writing sound more objective is the use of ‘it’ as an ‘empty subject’, as in the following:

It can be argued / demonstrated / that…

It is evident / logical / plausible / conceivable that…

Formality
Informal, everyday spoken English relies a lot on the situation and speakers to supply extra information that completes the message. For example:

For this experiment, twenty subjects will do.

Using formal, academic English we might write:

For the experiment to be viable, twenty subjects are sufficient.

In the first example, the meaning of ‘do’ is unclear. The meaning of the second example does not require interpretation or context to be understood, but has only one meaning.

Intensity or emphasis is created through choice of words, and does not rely on intonation. Watch out for emphasis that can only be conveyed through tone of voice by reading your writing aloud, such of the use of ‘do’ for emphasis. Look at the following sentences. Which one relies on spoken features?

This treatment does appear to work.

This treatment in fact / indeed / definitely appears effective.

Avoid the following:

Colloquial terms: such as ‘furphy’, ‘heaps of …’, which are only understood locally; slang e.g. ‘bloke’, ‘knock off’, and idioms e.g. ‘nest egg’, ‘snowed under’ because meanings are often interpreted differently by different readers.

Some everyday words in English are clearly associated with an informal or ‘chatty’ spoken style. Below are some examples:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Informal word</th>
<th>Possible alternatives</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>big</td>
<td>large, great</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>little</td>
<td>small, lesser</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>tiny</td>
<td>extremely small, minuscule</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>like (adverb)</td>
<td>such as e.g. ‘fruit, such as apple and pears’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>kind of</td>
<td>somewhat, to an extent, e.g. it was successful to an extent.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>kind, sort</td>
<td>type</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>thing</td>
<td>object, concept, idea, issue</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>good</td>
<td>high quality, suitable, effective</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>bad</td>
<td>inadequate, unsuitable, ineffective</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A wide range of intensifiers, or expressions that indicate degree, are also very informal:

Informal intensifiers | Possible alternatives

Academic Skills

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Go for excellence
have a review
r
range weather is definitely caused by global
on the other hand,
ed in spoken language are
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Informal language in the first example makes it sound
climat
between voting intention, climate change belief, and
professed low levels of trust in government, the link

require much more detail.

Certain verbs commonly used in spoken language are
too vague for academic writing. Note the many possible
meanings of the following.

have: possess (have a car); have access to (have a
photocopier); undergo (have a review); suffer (have a
seizure); bear (have a baby)

Vague verbs Possible Alternatives
get obtain, receive, retrieve, become
keep continue, retain, maintain, store
do complete, undertake, act
make construct, create, complete
put insert, place, position, propose

Phrasal verbs: verbs which require a preposition for
meaning such as look out, get on, live down, are
similarly imprecise. A single verb with the same meaning
should be used.

Caution

Strong, unqualified statements such as the following are
easily disproven.
All this strange weather is definitely caused by global
warming.

These cautious but inclusive statements may be
challenged, but cannot be easily dismissed:
Current abnormal weather conditions may be shown with
reasonable certainty to be products of global warming.

In conclusion

‘Academic style’ is not only a matter of particular words
or particular grammatical features. It involves how you
think, how you reason, and how you interact with what
has already been discovered or argued. It is central to
your studies. Aim to deepen your understanding of what
it is, how it works – and how you can apply it.

Further resources

Purdue University. (2011, December 2). Purdue
University: Online Writing Lab. Retrieved December 2,
2011, from http://owl.english.purdue.edu

Oxford University Press.