

# 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 as 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:

| Informal word | Possible alternatives  |
|---------------|--|
| big           | large, great   |
| little        | small, lesser  |
| tiny          | extremely small, minuscule                                   |
| like (adverb) | such as e.g. 'fruit, such as apple and pears'                |
| kind of       | somewhat, to an extent, e.g. it was successful to an extent. |
| kind, sort    | type   |
| thing         | object, concept, idea, issue                                 |
| good          | high quality, suitable, effective                            |
| bad           | inadequate, unsuitable, ineffective                          |

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

| Informal intensifiers | Possible alternatives |
|-----------------------|-----------------------|
|-----------------------|-----------------------|

|   |  |
|---|--|
| <i>hardly, barely any, not much, not many</i> | <i>few</i>                                 |
| <i>pretty, e.g. 'pretty stable'</i>           | <i>quite, rather</i>                       |
| <i>really</i>                                 | <i>very, extremely, highly, especially</i> |
| <i>lots of, heaps of, plenty of</i>           | <i>several, considerable, plentiful</i>    |
| <i>a lot, e.g. 'it is used a lot'</i>         | <i>frequently, often, extensively</i>      |

**Contractions:** (e.g. *don't, won't, can't*) are **only** used in spoken contexts. Use full forms of the words.

**Rhetorical questions:** Asking a question in a research report or essay evades your responsibility to provide specific information to your reader. Use indirect questions to specify more exactly the issue under study. Compare the following.

*The intervention has been underway for four years now. How successful has it been?*

*Given that the intervention has been underway for four years, it should be possible to measure its success.*

**Unspecified categories:** Expressions such as *'etcetera', 'and so on', 'and so forth', 'and that kind of thing'* again place too much responsibility on your reader. Consider the following:

*'...ribosomes, vacuoles, mitochondria etc.'*

Only a biologist could add extra examples to the above list. Further, you have not demonstrated your own specialist knowledge. Help your reader; name a **category** into which all your examples fit. For example:

*Tariffs, embargoes, and **other protectionist laws**...*

*Similes, metaphors, personification and **such literary devices**...*

**Precision:** The words you choose need to demonstrate sufficient analysis of the issues involved. Compare the following two sentences.

Imprecise: *Most people didn't trust the government to do the right thing about climate change, but it still changed their vote.*

Precise: *While the majority of survey respondents professed low levels of trust in government, the link between voting intention, climate change belief, and climate-related behaviours is strong.*

Informal language in the first example makes it sound like a personal opinion.

In the second example, the writer has specified exactly which group of people he or she is referring to, what their actions were, and the degree of strength of those actions or their outcomes.

However, you do not need to supply exhaustive detail on every matter you write about. You convey your scholarly judgement by deciding exactly how much detail is required for your purposes. In the example *'changed their vote'* might be sufficient for an essay on the subject of environmental management, where details of voter behaviour are not central. A politics essay on voter beliefs about climate change, on the other hand, might

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*)

| <b>'Vague verbs'</b> | <b>Possible Alternatives</b>             |
|----------------------|--|
| <i>get</i>           | <i>obtain, receive, retrieve, become</i> |
| <i>keep</i>          | <i>continue, retain, maintain, store</i> |
| <i>do</i>            | <i>complete, undertake, act</i>          |
| <i>make</i>          | <i>construct, create, complete</i>       |
| <i>put</i>           | <i>insert, place, position, propose</i>  |

**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>

Swan, M. (2003). *Practical English Usage*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

## Academic Skills