



Academic writing style

In the same way that recipes or letters use a particular style and form of language, academic assignments usually follow a particular style.

The following guidelines will assist you to develop an academic writing style:

Be concise and specific

To write in a precise way:

- use specific examples to illustrate your points.
- cut out as much dead wood as possible.
- ask other people to read your work to look for any irrelevant or vague material.

Use the terminology of your subject or discipline and be clear about what you are saying. Don't assume that a tutor will simply know what you mean. When you really know your subject you should be able to articulate the main ideas and explain the main terms to someone who hasn't studied in your area.

Build your subject vocabulary

- Keep your own glossary (list) of subject words at the back of a folder.
- Develop a list of 'power' words, ones that say a lot succinctly: e.g. 'nocturnal' is a more precise word for 'is active at night'.
- Use a thesaurus and a subject-specific dictionary.

Be tentative

Academic writing is cautious in presenting findings. Most theories are open to some modification.

To indicate new and emerging research, use words or phrases such as:

Suggests that...

There is a possibility that...

Studies indicate that...

It would seem that...

For knowledge that is more established, use:

It is probable...

The majority of...

There is a tendency for...

Recent studies confirm...

For example: Mahlab (1994) suggests that there are significant differences in communication...

Use impersonal language

You are often asked to make judgements and include your own views on an issue. However, in most subject areas you are required to avoid the pronoun 'I'.

The fact that you are not reporting another person's view implies that the view is your own. In fact, whatever is included in your essay that is not attributed to someone else, [i.e. Jones (1987) demonstrates that...; according to Smith (1994)...] is assumed to be yours.

For example:

So instead of saying "I think that all guns should be banned", you can say "strict government control of guns is required".

Use formal language

A university assignment requires a more formal type of language. Allow plenty of time to revise your expression after you have composed the main content.

You need to:

- Avoid slang (e.g. 'cool') and language that is too casual (e.g., 'pretty awful').
- Use full forms rather than abbreviations, e.g., does not rather than doesn't.
- Consider the use of nominalisation (making noun structures) e.g., "comprehension is aided by repetition", rather than "you can understand something better if it is repeated".
- Be careful: too much nominalisation can make your writing unnecessarily complex and tedious to read.

Use strong reporting words

When you use other people's research, you can give it extra significance by using a more precise reporting word,

e.g., "Jacob (1998) **concedes** that the test is not 100% reliable." is more powerful than "Jacob **says** that..."

Useful reporting words include:

claim, describe, outline, examine, discuss, state, suggest, observe, identify, consider, assert, propose, contend, support, recommend, purport, dismiss, refute, dispute, contradict, disagree, concur, point out, show, confirm, demonstrate, attribute...to, calculate, contend, argue, reveal, maintain.

NB: The more you read academic material, the faster you will pick up the appropriate academic style, and the more academic reporting words you will acquire.

Use your own "voice"

Your assignment should be in your own words to reflect your thinking.

If you rely too much on quotes from different sources, your assignment task may lack cohesion and unity of style.

Make your own paraphrases and summaries of research using proper citations.

If English is not your first language, ask someone to read your assignments before you submit them, but don't be afraid to use your own 'voice'.

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