

Introduction to Academic Writing Style

Here are a few general points to remember when you are writing in academia. As well as using appropriate language and aiming for 100% accuracy in your grammar and vocabulary, you should also remember that you're writing for a specific audience. Hence, the importance of punctuation, sentences, paragraphs, and overall structure still applies, all of which guide the reader of your argument.

AVOID SOME ASPECTS OF INFORMAL ENGLISH

- Don't (do not!) use contractions (e.g. it's, he'll, it'd etc): always use the full form (it is/has, he will, it would/had).
- Don't use colloquial language or slang (e.g. kid, a lot of/lots of, cool) always write as concisely as you can, with no irrelevant material or "waffle".
- Generally, avoid "phrasal verbs" (e.g. get off, get away with, put in etc): instead, use one word equivalents.
- Avoid common but vague words and phrases such as get, nice, thing. Your writing needs to be more precise.
- Avoid overuse of brackets; don't use exclamation marks or dashes; avoid direct questions; don't use "etc".
- Always use capital letters appropriately and never use the type of language used in texting!

STRUCTURE YOUR WRITING CAREFULLY

- Make sure you write in complete sentences.
- Divide your writing up into paragraphs.
- Use connecting words and phrases to make your writing explicit and easy to follow.
- Check your grammar and spelling carefully.

MAKE YOUR WRITING FORMAL AND IMPERSONAL

- Avoid too much personal language (I, my, we). In some disciplines, we avoid using the first person completely. Never use emotive language; be objective rather than subjective.
- Avoid being too dogmatic and making sweeping generalisations. It is usually best to use some sort of "hedging" language (see below) and to qualify statements that you make.
- You should consistently use evidence from your source reading to back up what you are saying and reference this correctly.
- Avoid sexist language, such as chairman, mankind. Don't refer to "the doctor" as he; instead, make the subject plural and refer to them as they. Avoid he/she, herself/himself
- Use nominalisation; that is, try to write noun-based phrases rather than verb-based ones.

For example, instead of: Crime was increasing rapidly, and the police were becoming concerned.

Rather, write: The rapid increase in crime was causing concern among the police.

HEDGING/AVOIDING COMMITMENT

When we write we want to be cautious when we express some ideas or an argument, rather than being assertive (only when there is substantial evidence), you should:

- Avoid overuse of first-person pronouns (we, our) (I, my, is allowed in social sciences research)
- Use impersonal subjects instead (It is believed that ..., it can be argued that ...)
- Use passive verbs to avoid stating the 'doer' (Tests have been conducted) (preferred in medical sciences research)
- Use verbs (often with it as subject) such as suggest, claim, suppose
- Use 'attitudinal signals' such as apparently, arguably, ideally, strangely, unexpectedly. These words allow you to hint at your attitude to something without using personal language.
- Use verbs such as would, could, may, might which 'soften' what you're saying.
- Use qualifying adverbs such as some, several, a minority of, a few, many to avoid making overgeneralisations.

Adapted from: Birmingham City University, Centre for Academic Success, Study guides: Writing. [Online]

Available at: <http://library.bcu.ac.uk/learner/writingguides/1.20.htm> [Accessed January 2021]

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