

Academic style in writing summary

Formality

Academic writing is a series of language choices that often depend on the discipline or genre of assignment, but should always help your reader understand your point. Academic writing is effective when it avoids conversational language choices which make it too informal, but also language that is too formal or pompous. Your aim should always be to write clearly, concisely, and precisely.

Choosing vocabulary

Being a student requires you to learn how to use both the knowledge and language of your chosen discipline. However, most disciplines would avoid the use of

- conversational language
- slang
- contractions

When choosing verbs, it is often possible to choose a more formal choice over a conversational choice. For example, *look into* can be replaced by *investigate*; and *keep up* can be replaced by *maintain*.

Being objective

Being a student often requires you to develop a style of writing that is objective; that is, it is impersonal. Language choices include

- avoiding the use of personal pronouns (I/my/we/our)
I aim to prove can be replaced by *This essay aims to prove*
I found that can be replaced by *The findings show that*
- using the passive voice
I heated the solution can be replaced by *The solution was heated*

The passive voice can be an effective choice if you want to focus on the action rather than who did the action, or when the person who did the action is unknown.

Note: some disciplines or genres, such as reflections, permit the use of personal pronouns. Also, some writing applications such as Microsoft Word and Grammarly may question your choice of the passive voice.

Showing confidence and caution

Being objective also requires you to evaluate and interpret evidence. Your choice of language should reflect the strength of the available evidence. If the evidence is strong, you will choose language such as *clearly shows/demonstrates/proves/is irrefutable*.

If the evidence is less strong, you will choose language which shows caution, including

- modal verbs: *may/might/could*
- adjectives: *possible/probable/likely*
- nouns: *possibility/probability/likelihood/tendency*
- verbs: *tend to/indicate/suggest/imply*

Being concise

Being concise is helpful for your reader, but as a student, you are also required to write assignments within a given word limit. Language choices include

- avoiding long sentences
Long sentences make it harder for a reader to follow your point and increase the risk of grammatical errors.
- avoiding redundant language and verbosity
Redundant words repeat the meaning of another word, such as *discuss about* (the word *discuss* already means *talk about*), *final completion*, or *close proximity*.
Verbosity means using a long phrase when a single word or shorter phrase is available, such as *for the reason that* (= *because*), or *for the purpose of* (= *to*).

Being precise and explicit

Being precise requires you to choose language that ensures your meaning is as clear as possible. This means you should aim to use specific adjectives, adverbs, nouns and verbs instead of vague words. For example

| | | |
|-----------------|----------------------|---|
| <i>good</i> | can be replaced with | <i>reasonable/efficient/effective</i> |
| <i>a couple</i> | can be replaced with | <i>two</i> |
| <i>people</i> | can be replaced with | <i>Australians over 70/job interviewees</i> |
| <i>things</i> | can be replaced with | <i>the wheat crop/the stethoscope</i> |

Being explicit requires you to write in a style that informs the reader rather than forcing the reader to infer what you mean. Again, this is about language choices, including

- Giving clear aims in your introduction
- Rephrasing the key points in your conclusion
- Using well-constructed paragraphs
- Using headings and sub-headings as appropriate
- Using signpost language to make your writing easy to follow

Using nouns

Nominalisations are abstract nouns created by adding suffixes to other words:

install – **installation**

Marx – **Marxism**

complex – **complexity**

They are useful for expressing important disciplinary concepts, but they become a problem when they are overused. If you see nouns ending in suffixes like *-tion*, *-ment*, *-al*, *-th*, *-ry*, or *-ence*, consider whether each is describing an important abstract concept or whether you could replace it with the verb.

Disciplinary differences

All academic writing shares the goals of clarity, conciseness and precision, but you have a responsibility to learn and apply the style specific to your discipline. This requires you to observe, note and adopt the language features from your field over a period of time. In this way, you will start to communicate in a way that is recognised by your community of practice.