Academic Style

In the same way that recipes or disc jockeys use a particular style and form of language, academic assignments usually follow a particular style. Here are some guidelines:

Be tentative
Very little in the world is clearly either right or wrong, all or nothing. Beliefs we may have held at one time may be challenged. Most research cannot cover every case of an event or phenomenon so most theories are open to modification. Academics, therefore, are cautious in the way they present their findings. And so should you be in your assignments. Use words or phrases such as:

- suggests that
- there is a tendency for
- it would seem that
- probable
- the majority of

eg. Recent research suggests that a majority of people prefer email to traditional letter-writing as a mode of communication (Mahlab 1994).

Be precise and specific
It’s important to be clear about what you are saying and to be able to use the specific terminology of your subject or discipline. You can’t assume that a tutor will simply know what you mean. When you really know your subject you should be able to explain the main terms and articulate the main ideas to someone who hasn’t studied in your area. You could:

- keep your own glossary (list) of subject at the back of a folder
- develop a list of “power” words, ones that say a lot very succinctly: e.g. “a controversial idea” is a much more precise way of saying “an idea that not everyone agrees with”, "nocturnal" is a more precise word for "is active at night".
- get other people to read your work
- become a ruthless editor, cutting out as much dead-wood as possible
- use specific examples to illustrate your points rather than just talk generally. eg. If you are discussing the power of brand recognition you could talk about "Kleenex" or "Nike"
- use a good dictionary - not a pocket one
- use a subject-specific dictionary eg. dictionary of economics
Use formal language
Writing a university assignment is quite different from having a casual chat with friends. You are expected to use a more formal type of language. This may mean changing habits you have developed and allowing plenty of time to revise your style after you have finished the main content.

You need to:
• avoid slang eg. cool, and language that is too casual eg. pretty awful.. So you might say instead that a paper was persuasive or insightful or poorly researched or unsubstantiated.
• use full forms rather than abbreviations eg does not, should have, it is rather than doesn’t, should’ve, it’s.
• consider the use of nominalisation (making noun structures) rather than wordy verb structures
eg: “Comprehension is aided by repetition” is more formal than “You can understand something better if it is repeated.”
or “The rapid increase in crime was causing concern among the police” is more formal than “Crime was increasing rapidly and the police were becoming concerned.”

Warning: too much nominalisation can make your writing unnecessarily complex and tedious to read. You have to strike a balance here.

Use impersonal language
In some subject areas you are expected to avoid the pronoun "I". At the same time, however, you are often asked to make judgements and include your own views on an issue. How can you do this without saying "I think... I feel..." etc?

In fact, whatever is included in your essay that is not attributed to someone else, (ie. Jones (1987) demonstrates that..., according to Smith (1994)....) is assumed to be yours. So instead of saying "I think that all guns should be banned" you can say “There is a case for stricter government control on guns.” The fact that you are not reporting another person’s view implies that it is your own.

Use powerful reporting words
When you include other people’s research you can pack in extra meaning by using a more precise reporting word.
eg "Jacob (1998) concedes that the test is not 100% reliable." is more powerful than "Jacob says that..." since concedes carries the extra meaning of giving up something from a position. Other useful reporting words include:
describe, contend, examine, state, disagree, observe, assert, support, claim, dispute suggest, purport, persuade, dismiss, refute, propose, concur, recommend, object, contradict

NB The more you read academic material, the faster you will pick up the appropriate academic style.