

Writing in an Appropriate Style

Novelists and other creative writers often have a personal style of writing that is as distinctive as their signature. However, when you write assignments as a tertiary student, the aim is generally not to draw attention to your personality. You are usually expected to write in an academic style, although expectations about this varies a little depending on what program you are studying. For instance, if you are studying Business, you would be expected to develop a business style; if you are studying media, you might be expected to write advertising copy in some of your assignments.

It is probably best to think of academic style as clear, concise, unambiguous and accurate. It is **not** writing that is difficult to read, complicated or pompous. Here is a fun example of what academic style is not:

*Scintillate, scintillate globule aurific
Fair would I fathom thy nature specific
Loftily poised in the ether capacious
Strongly resembling a gem carbonaceous
Scintillate, scintillate globule aurific
Fair would I fathom thy nature specific.*

This, in case you had not recognised it, is ‘Twinkle, twinkle, little star’!

You will have noticed that academic style isn’t used in all academic settings. Most classes and lectures are given in a fairly informal way, with words and phrases used that wouldn’t be appropriate for academic writing, for instance, *a whole bunch of; you can get a really good go at it; pretty smart, etc.* You will also have noticed that academic writing is not used here – the tone of this writing is more conversational and informal.

So what do we mean by style, and more importantly, what is academic style?

Look at these three very different styles of saying the same thing:

<i>‘Posh’</i>	<i>‘What a splendiferous day.’</i>
<i>‘Ocker’</i>	<i>‘Beaut weather mate’</i>
<i>Academic</i>	<i>‘Evidence from the Bureau of Meteorology indicates that a temperature of approximately 40 degrees is expected.’</i>

Academic language is **factual**, backed up by **evidence**.

However, it also has other characteristics. It uses:

- tentative statements
- full forms of words
- nominalised phrasing

- passive voice
- third person pronouns
- few direct questions
- formal negative forms
- no clichés, redundant words or colloquialisms

Note: Although you should be aware of these characteristics, it's probably not a good idea to try to completely change your writing style when you first sit down to write a draft of an essay or report. If you try to remember everything, you may sit for hours trying to perfect the first sentence. Instead, write however you feel comfortable writing, but learn to develop your *editing* skills, paying attention to these characteristics.

Tentative statements

We need to use tentative statements such as *tends to*, *appears to*, *suggest that*, *would seem to*, *the audience indicates...* rather than direct, categorical ones that overgeneralise:

Write: This *tends to occur whenever there is a downturn in commodity prices*.
not: This *occurs* whenever there is a downturn in commodity prices.
 (You can only say this if you have investigated what happens *every time* there is a downturn in commodity prices.)

Full forms of words

Use only the full forms of words, not contractions, eg., *do not* instead of *don't*; *cannot* instead of *can't*:

Write: Unemployment figures *will not improve until the economy is stronger*.
not: Unemployment figures *won't* improve until the economy is stronger.

Nominalised phrasing

Academic writing usually has more nouns (*naming* words) than verbs (*action* or *being* words). In the following pairs of sentences, the first sentence relies on nouns to a greater extent (the nouns are underlined) and the second sentence makes use of verbs.

Write: Germany's invasion of Poland in 1939 was the immediate cause of the outbreak of the Second World War.

not: Germany invaded Poland in 1939. This was the immediate cause of the Second World War breaking out.

Write: The recession occurred because of an over-production of consumer goods.

not: The recession occurred because too many consumer goods were produced.

Write: The rapid increase in crime is causing concern.

not: Crime is increasing rapidly and causing concern.

Note: If you nominalise too much, it can make your writing more difficult to read because more ideas and concepts are covered in fewer words (the text is more dense). There is now a trend towards more active, 'reader-friendly' academic language. However, if you get comments written on your assignment such as: 'style not academic', this is often what they are referring to.

Passive voice

When describing processes, use the passive voice. When you use the active voice, the subject (the person or thing performing the action) is important. However, in much of academic writing, it's not important *who* did the action as *what the action is*. For instance, if you are writing a lab report, you shouldn't write:

I prepared the test-tubes by heating them. ('I' is the subject)

You should write:

The test-tubes were prepared by heating them.

(It doesn't say who did it because it's not as important as what was done)

Note that in passive voice, there are always two verbs, usually in the form of '*were ...*' or '*was ...*', usually followed by '*by*'. In the above example, the verbs are '*were prepared*'

Note: You should only use the passive voice when you really need to; overuse tends to produce dull writing!

Third person pronouns (writing impersonally)

To write in an objective manner, we usually use third person pronouns such as *they*, *he*, *she*, and *it*, not *I*, *we* or *you*. For example:

Write: **It is recommended that...** not I recommend that...

Write: **It was found that...** not I found that...

Use 'thinking' statements not 'feeling' statements and avoid referring to yourself. For example, **It is clear that...** is better than **I feel that...** or **I think that...** However, in some disciplines and in some types of writing (such as reflective journal writing) it's appropriate to use a more personal style. Check with your lecturer or teacher.

Don't address the reader as **you**.

Write: **The results can be seen in Table 1.**

not: You can see the results in Table 1.

Few direct questions

Generally avoid direct questions. For example:

Write: **The department needs to consider how costs can be lowered.**

Or **Consideration needs to be given to the ways in which costs may be lowered.**

not: What can be done to lower costs?

Appropriate formal negative forms

More formal versions of negative forms need to be used:

Write:	no	not:	not...any
	little		not...much
	few		not...many

Write: The analysis yielded *no* new results.
not: The analysis did *not* yield *any* new results.

Write: The recent budget allocated *little* funding to the program
not: The recent budget *did not* allocate *much* funding to the program.

Write: There seems to be *few* viable solutions to this problem.
not: There *does not* seem to be *many* viable solutions to this problem.

Clichés, redundant words and colloquialisms

Some words and expressions have lost their effectiveness through overuse (clichés) or include redundant words (tautologies). Examples of clichés we often see include:

in recent years	(recently)
with a high degree of certainty	(certain)
at this moment in time	(now)
in close proximity to	(close)

Examples of tautologies include:

advanced planning	(all planning is for the future!)
cooperate together	(cooperating is always with someone else)
few in number	(few is always used with numbers of things)
still remains	(remains means it's <i>still</i> there)

Colloquialisms (informal sayings, such as *to make a move* or *to muck around*, etc.) should never be used.

Now, practise your new information by doing the Learning Activities

ACTIVITY

Find out how much you know about writing in an appropriate style by trying out these four learning activities. Check the answers on the last page.

Activity 1

Here is a list of 'worn out' phrases we commonly see. For each, tick the word that could be used as a substitute.

1. In view of the fact that
 - Therefore
 - Because
 - So

2. At this precise moment in time
 - Precisely
 - Momentarily
 - Now

 3. Are found to be in agreement
 - Agree
 - Similar
 - Apparent

 4. Undertake a study of
 - Give an undertaking
 - Complete an action
 - Study

 5. In view of the foregoing circumstances
 - Consequently
 - Incidentally
 - Whenever

 6. In virtually all sectors of the environment
 - Wherever
 - Everywhere
 - Where
-

Activity 2 Here is a paragraph that should be written in a more academic tone. Read it through and underline the parts that need to be rewritten. Look at the answers at the back to see if you've identified them all, and read the suggestions to make these elements more academic.

Given the general knowledge of the health risks of smoking, it's no wonder that heaps of smokers have tried at some time in their lives to quit. However, in most cases, their attempts are unsuccessful. People begin smoking, often when they're adolescents, for lots of reasons, including the example of parents and pressure from peers. If others in one's group of friends are starting to smoke, it can be hard to resist going along with the crowd. Once people start smoking, they're likely to get hooked. The addiction to smoking is partly physiological; smokers become used to the effects of nicotine and experience painful withdrawal symptoms when they give it up. In addition, people become psychologically dependent on smoking as a way of reducing anxiety and coping with particular situations.

Activity 3 Identify the words or phrases that make the sentences below informal. Then choose a word from the list below that could be used to replace the words or phrases and give the sentences a more appropriate academic style. Note that you may need to change the grammar of the word (eg fluctuate = fluctuating.)

assist reduce create investigate raise
establish increase determine fluctuate eliminate

1. Expert systems can help out the user in the diagnosis of problems.
2. The program was set up to improve access to medical care.
3. Research expenditure has gone up by nearly \$3.6 million.
4. Researchers have found out that this drug has serious side effects.
5. The use of optical character readers (OCRs) should cut down on the number of problems with Australia Post.
6. Building nuclear power will not get rid of the power crisis.
7. Researchers have been looking into this problem for more than fifteen years.
8. The issue was brought up for investigation.
9. Engineers have come up with better designs using computer simulations.
10. The emission levels have been going up and down.

Activity 4:

Look at your most recent written work for your program. Underline any words or phrases you think might not be in an academic style and make some changes.

Answers

Activity 1:

1. Because
2. Now
3. Agree
4. Study
5. Consequently
6. Everywhere

Activity 2:

Given the general knowledge of the health risks of smoking, (1)*it's* (2)*no wonder* that (3) *heaps* of smokers have tried at some time in their lives to (4)*quit*. However, in most cases, their attempts are unsuccessful. People begin smoking, often when (5)*they're* adolescents, for (6)*lots of* reasons, including the example of parents and pressure from peers. If others in one's group of friends are starting to smoke, it can be hard to resist (7) *going along with the crowd*. Once people start smoking, (8)*they're* likely to get (9)*hooked*. The addiction to smoking is partly physiological; smokers become used to the effects of nicotine and experience painful withdrawal symptoms when they (10)*give it up*. In addition, (11)*people become* psychologically dependent on smoking as a way of reducing anxiety and coping with particular situations.

1. Contracted forms should not be used – it should be 'it is'
2. This is conversational language – replace with 'to be expected'
3. This is too informal – replace with 'many'. It also needs backing up with evidence.
4. This is too informal – replace with 'stop smoking'
5. Another contraction – replace with 'they are'
6. Too informal – replace with 'many'
7. Conversational language – replace with 'behaving in a similar manner'
8. Another contraction – replace with 'they are'
9. Too informal – replace with 'addicted'
10. Conversational language – replace with 'stop'.
11. Too definite – suggest a more tentative 'many people'. It also needs backing up with evidence.

Activity 3:

Here are the sentences written in a more appropriate academic style.

Expert systems can **assist** the user in the diagnosis of problems.

The program was **established** to improve access to medical care.

Research expenditure has **increased** by nearly \$3.6 million.

Researchers have **determined** that this drug has serious side effects.

The use of optical character readers (OCRs) should **reduce** the number of problems with Australia Post. Building nuclear power will not **eliminate** the power crisis.

Researchers have been **investigating** this problem for more than fifteen years.

The issue was **raised** for investigation.

Engineers have **created** better designs using computer simulations.

The emission levels have been **fluctuating**.

These materials were produced by the RMIT University Study and Learning Unit.