

Writing in an academic style

Most essays, reports, dissertations, theses and assignments you produce at university need to be written in an 'academic style'. It is important, therefore, to understand what academic writing looks like and learn how to use it in your own writing.



Academic writing:

Uses evidence to support an idea

This means referring to published work whenever you are presenting ideas or statements that you want readers to accept as truthful and accurate. For example, if you want to suggest that 'praising children's achievements is the best way to motivate them' you would need to find, and include evidence from published sources that supports your idea. This involves paraphrasing or quoting from appropriate literature and including a citation* in your text.

*A citation is one half of a referencing system such as Harvard. The author's name and date of publication appears in brackets within the text – like this (Morgan, 2012). The other half comes in the list of references at the end and gives full details of the publication or source.

Gives an opinion without using personal language

This usually means avoiding phrases such as: 'I think...', 'we suggest...' or 'you can...' as in this example:

I think that this report is limited in terms of its impact as it only looked at one care home in the region. You can see that this is a problem as we need to know about the quality of care throughout the North-East.

Better like this:

The report by Taras et al (2010) is limited in terms of its impact as it only looked at one care home in the region. This is a problem when considering the quality of care throughout the North-East.

Note: some modules may require you to include personal reflections within your academic writing which does involve using personal language, so check if you are not sure.

Uses tentative language

This means 'hedging' or using subtle language to express ideas so it is clear what you are trying to say but there is still room for discussion. In these paired (a/b) examples the second version of the sentence uses tentative words which are underlined.

a) Counselling helps to sort out your problems. **b)** Counselling may help to sort out your problems.

a) Rates of infection differ from region to region. **b)** Rates of infection appear to differ from region to region.

a) Climate change is responsible for this unusual weather. **b)** It is possible that climate change is responsible for this unusual weather.

More examples of tentative phrases:

probably; might; seems; often; it could be argued that; the evidence suggests that; it is apparent that; it may be that; it is unlikely that.

Avoids informal language

Contractions	<i>won't</i> (will not), <i>it'll</i> (it will), <i>isn't</i> (is not), <i>can't</i> (can not)
Slang	<i>chuck</i> (throw away), <i>kids</i> (children), <i>nicked</i> (stole), <i>pal</i> (a friend)
Clichés	<i>out of the blue</i> (unexpectedly), <i>spot on</i> (correct), <i>give it a go</i> (try) <i>play it by ear</i> (see what happens) <i>spitting image</i> (exactly the same)
Colloquialisms	<i>It's a pain</i> (unpleasant/tedious/ difficult), <i>knock-off early</i> (finish/ go home early), <i>get worked up</i> (become annoyed)

Links sentences appropriately

This is done to give clarity, emphasis or caution.

Examples include: for instance; mainly; above all; however; similarly; alternatively; although; as a result; that is; consequently.

Remember that 'moreover' and 'furthermore' indicate that the second part of a phrase is more noteworthy than the first, so think carefully about what you want to say.

Compare the following:

*The Prime Minister wants to reduce the deficit; **furthermore**, he wants to cut local spending.*
*The Prime Minister wants to reduce the deficit; **as a result**, he wants to cut local spending.*

Other points to remember:

Abbreviations

Clearly, you must avoid shortcuts as you might use in text messages e.g. lol, gr8, RU OK and so on. For other appropriate instances, write out the words in full the first time e.g. Institute of Modern Art (IMA) and put the abbreviation in brackets. Use the abbreviation thereafter. If in doubt, write out names and titles in full.

Sentence length

Long sentences, or those that incorporate more than 3 ideas, are difficult to follow. Consider creating 2 sentences of different length. Which example is easier to read?

Long sentence

An earthquake is the result of a sudden release of energy in the Earth's crust that creates seismic waves which are recorded with a seismometer, also known as a seismograph.

Or

Two shorter sentences

An earthquake is the result of a sudden release of energy in the Earth's crust that creates seismic waves. Earthquakes are recorded with a seismometer, also known as a seismograph.

In summary

Academic writing has many features which mark it out from other types of writing. These features are not 'strict rules' but style guidelines. As you become more aware of these features you will begin to recognise academic style when you read and then start to use it in your own writing.

