

Module 2:

Writing in an Academic Style

Aims of this module:

- To introduce the features of academic writing style
- To describe ways of making writing more formal and technical
- To show how to make academic writing more impersonal and objective

What is academic style?

Academic style is the style of writing by students and professionals in academic disciplines, e.g. engineering, science, architecture, philosophy, fine arts and law. Many of these disciplines have their own distinctive style. For example, the kind of writing you find in engineering or philosophy is very different from what you will find in fine arts or law. One distinguishing feature of all types of academic writing, however, is **technicality**, i.e. the use of terms with specific meanings in each subject.

The second aspect of 'style' is that **written** styles of English tend to be very different from **spoken** styles. Written styles tend to be **formal** whereas spoken styles are more casual.

Written texts used in most academic contexts need to be:

formal and technical
impersonal

to sound authoritative
to sound objective

Using Formal and Technical Vocabulary

You can change the style of your writing through the way you plan, draft and edit your texts. To make your writing more **formal**:

- Structure your writing into paragraphs with clear *topic sentences*. (See Module 3 to find out how to structure a paragraph.)
- *Avoid contractions* (e.g. didn't, it'll). Instead, use the full forms (e.g. did not, it will).
- Choose *formal vocabulary* instead of informal vocabulary. For example, "somewhat" is more formal than "a bit", "offspring" is more formal than "babies", "insufficient" is more formal than "not enough", etc.
- Choose language which is *less intense*, less emotional. For example, instead of strong words like "wonderful", "useless" or "terrible", use more moderate words such as "helpful", "poor", "inadequate" or "problematic". Instead of using absolute positives and negatives like "proof" or "wrong", academic writing often has more cautious or graded evaluations, such as "strong evidence" or "less convincing".

(Note: Different disciplines/subject areas allow different levels of intensity. Check the style of books and articles for that discipline/subject.)

To make your writing more technical:

- Build up your vocabulary with the *technical terms* which are used in your discipline of study (e.g. linguistics, accounting, psychology), as well as in the specific field/topic of study within that discipline (e.g. phonology within linguistics, taxation within accounting).
- Be careful about the *meaning* of technical terms. Often the same word has a different meaning in another discipline. (For example, the word "discourse" is a technical term in linguistics, as well as in disciplines such as sociology and philosophy. However, "discourse" has different meanings in each discipline, and it even has different meanings *within* linguistics, in different specialist areas.)
- Make sure you understand and use the key *categories and relationships* in your discipline: i.e. the way information and ideas are organised into groups, types and parts. (For example, in Occupational Therapy, clients' activities can be grouped into four areas: *self-maintenance*, *rest*, *leisure* and *productivity*. In the discipline of Law, law is separated into two types: *common law* and *statute law*.) The more expert you are in your discipline, the more of these you know and the more you are able to use these relationships to structure your writing, the more technical your writing will be.

Exercise 1

Rewrite these sentences using a more formal, academic style.

1. Dr. L. does small surgery in his rooms and in emergencies he sews up wounds too.
2. It is important to get rid of impurities so a lot of effort has gone into figuring out the best method of refinement.
3. How can immigrants get equal treatment and a fair go? Discrimination isn't just in the workplace but is part and parcel of everyday life too.
4. A big problem with Rogers' counselling method is the length of time the therapy takes.
5. Television is reassuring because people can just sit there really safe and secure while watching dramatic and exciting shows.

Sounding impersonal

The style of academic writing is **objective and impersonal**, which means that it avoids mentioning personal feelings. In order to express your point of view and still write in an objective style, you can use some of the following language strategies:

- *Move information around* in the sentence to emphasise *things and ideas*, instead of people and feelings. For example, instead of writing "I believe the model is valid, based on these findings", write "These findings indicate that the model is valid" or "The following section will show how the model is validated by the findings".
- Avoid evaluative words which are based on non-technical judgements and feelings, such as "badly", "disappointment", "amazing", etc. Instead use *technical evaluations*

which related to academic or discipline-specific criteria and values - such as "valid", "inaccurate", "reliable", "clearly demonstrates", "rigour", "outdated", etc.

- Avoid intense or emotional evaluative language. Instead, use more *moderate and graded* evaluative language. For example, instead of writing "Parents who smoke are obviously abusing their children", write "Second hand smoke has some harmful effects on children's health."
- Use modality to *show caution* about your views, or to allow room for others to disagree. For example, instead of writing "I think second-hand smoke causes cancer", write "Second-hand smoke may cause cancer", or "There is evidence to support the possibility that second-hand smoke increases the risk of cancer."
- Find *authoritative sources* (i.e. authors or researchers in books or articles) who support your point of view, and refer to them in your writing. For example, instead of writing "Language is, in my view, clearly something social", write "As Halliday (1973) shows, language is intrinsically social."

Different disciplines often have quite **different expectations** about how objective or subjective your writing can be. In the discipline of Education, for example, it is often acceptable to refer to your experiences directly through pronouns (e.g. I, me, my). On the other hand, in many science disciplines, this would usually *not* be acceptable. It is wise to find out about the writing style expected in your discipline(s) by browsing recent articles in some authoritative journals in the field. (Ask your lecturer or tutor which journals, or check the reading list.)

Exercise 2

Rewrite the following text using an impersonal style of writing.

I want to argue that all children in Australia have the right to be educated in their mother tongue. I expect that many children in the past spent months or years in school but did not understand the lessons. I am convinced that many migrant children are failing in our education system because we do not have bilingual education programmes. If we look at the U.N. report on language and education, we can discover that children who become literate in their own language have the greatest chance of educational success. People have been discussing the latest figures on university entrance recently and you can tell that migrant children do less well than "Anglo" children at present. I suspect that this is because they have difficulty with English and I would claim that the government has done too little to help these children. Surely the best way to achieve this in Australia is for the State governments to set up bilingual education programmes for all migrant children. I would suggest that this is the number one important issue for multicultural Australia.

Answers

These are suggested answers only – there are many possible ways of rewriting these sentences / paragraphs objectively and impersonally.

Exercise 1

1. Dr. L. conducts minor surgery in his rooms and in emergencies he also sutures wounds.
2. It is important to remove impurities so considerable effort has been directed at optimal methods of refinement.
3. How can immigrants be given equal treatment? Discrimination is not only found in the workplace but is also a facet of everyday life.
4. A major problem with Rogers' counselling method is the duration of the therapy.
5. Television is reassuring to viewers because they can feel safe and secure while watching dramatic and exciting programs.

Exercise 2

This paper will argue that all children in Australia have the right to be educated in their mother tongue. Many children in the past have possibly spent months or years in school but did not understand the lessons. It appears certain that many migrant children are failing in our education system because we do not have bilingual education programmes. The U.N. report on language and education states that children who become literate in their own language have the greatest chance of educational success. Recent discussions concerning the latest figures on university entrance indicate that migrant children do less well than "Anglo" children at present. This is possibly because they have difficulty with English and it can be claimed that the government has done too little to help these children. It appears obvious that the best way to achieve this in Australia is for the State governments to set up bilingual education programmes for all migrant children. It could be suggested that this is an important issue for multicultural Australia.