

# Writing in an Academic Style

Part of achieving success at university is about developing an academic voice in your writing. Think of it as collecting the tools to build on your academic language skills. These key elements reflect an academic style.

## Objectivity & Tense

Reflect objectivity in your writing by avoiding the use of the personal 'I'. For more detail, read the helpsheet, *Writing in the Third Person*.

- This essay discusses the importance of ...
- This research shows that ...
- It could be said that ...

Become familiar with the present and past tenses, and use them consistently throughout a piece of writing.

### Present tense

- Smith's argument illustrates that ...
- Freud's theory supports the view that...

### Past tense

- The Industrial Revolution had an impact upon society in a number of different ways.
- The interviews were conducted with a group of parents in the Geelong area.

The use of objectivity in writing removes the 'personal' perspective, and infuses it with a sense of authority. Coupled with using a consistent tense, this gives writing a confident voice.

## Formal language

Just as you would in a job interview, using more formal language in your writing gives the reader a better impression. It helps you to appear knowledgeable and reliable.

### Avoid contractions

Rather than...	You could try...
don't, can't, it's, should've	do not, cannot, it is, should have

### Use the full form of words

Rather than...	You could try...
TV, memo, quote, mins	television, memorandum, quotation, minutes

### Avoid using informal words

Rather than...	You could try...
Smith's bit of research is ok.	Smith's research is significant because...
get, got, a lot	obtain, obtained, many



## Clarity & accuracy

### Use the right word for the right occasion

By way of example, the word 'crusade' has connotations of a battle and is more aggressive in tone than the word 'campaign', which implies a more considered approach. Imagine the effect of our politicians using the word 'crusade' in their pre-election advertising instead of 'campaign'. Most word processors have an in-built thesaurus, allowing you to look for synonyms while you write. Right-click on the word you wish to improve upon, and a list of similar words will appear under the 'Synonyms' option.

### Make every word count

Rather than...	You could try...
The theorist called Sigmund Freud wrote a significant piece of work called <i>On Narcissism</i> which offers valuable insights into ...	Freud (1914) offers valuable insights into ...

### Avoid vague words or phrases

- Help your reader know who or what you are referring to when using words like 'it', 'them', or 'they'.
- Words such as 'people' and 'ideas' can be vague so avoid saying: 'according to many people'. Explain which people or which ideas, e.g., Some studies indicate that.... (Pim & Pom, 2015; Jekyll & Hyde, 2011).
- When talking about past events, avoid phrases such as: 'in the past' or 'in recent times'. Be specific, e.g., In the 1950s, there was a tendency to focus on 'safety in conformity'...

### Avoid clichés

A cliché is a phrase or expression that is overused to such an extent that it loses its value. For example, 'as bright as a button' or 'as clear as mud'.

## Cautious language

### Avoid expressing strong opinions

Academic writing is concerned with presenting discussion in an objective way, so do not assert your opinions strongly. Do this by avoiding words like: 'very', 'really', 'quite' and 'extremely'.

Rather than...	You could try...
Smith has an extremely important point to make because...	Smith's view is significant because...

### Lean towards caution

Our views are contributing to a much wider debate surrounding your given topic. Your use of language must show that you making suggestions which contribute to this wider discussion.



Rather than...	You could try...
This view is correct because ...	'It could be said that ...', or 'It appears that ...'

## Do not stereotype, generalise or make assumptions

This especially applies to individuals or groups on the basis of their gender, race, nationality, religion, physical and mental capacity, age, sexuality, marital status, or political beliefs.

## Use neutral language

Rather than...	You could try...
fireman, policeman, mankind	firefighter, police officer, humankind

(Adapted from: De Montfort University. (2014). *How to write in an academic style*. Retrieved from <http://www.library.dmu.ac.uk/Support/Heat/index.php?page=488>)

## Related helpsheets

- Writing in the Third Person



Find this helpsheet online  
[studyskills.federation.edu.au](http://studyskills.federation.edu.au)