OBJECTIVITY

Academic writing presents and evaluates issues and arrives at an objective position; a position that focuses on and is informed by research and reasoning rather than personal feelings and opinions.

Personal pronouns, especially 'I', 'you' and 'we' are usually avoided, as these are often associated with subjective views that are influenced by personal preferences or biases.

Example

This statement sounds a bit like a personal opinion:

You can demonstrate that climate change is a real phenomenon by studying alterations in Antarctic ice layers.

To help establish an objective distance from the topic, instead of using a personal pronoun, you could try:

1. Using the topic as the subject

   Alterations in Antarctic ice layers demonstrate that climate change is a real phenomenon.

2. Using a passive verb

   The reality of climate change can be demonstrated by studying alterations in Antarctic ice layers.

3. Using 'it' as an empty subject

   It can be demonstrated that climate change is a real phenomenon by studying alterations in Antarctic ice layers.

Avoiding 'I' does not mean you cannot express your own opinion. Your own evaluation of the material is still extremely important; however, you can communicate this by using evidence or logical argumentation.

FORMALITY

Academic writing is very explicit and provides the reader with all the information they need to understand your meaning. This is in contrast to written or spoken English in less formal contexts, which often relies on readers or listeners to supply extra information that completes the message.

To make your writing more formal, try to:

1. Replace informal words that are associated with 'chatty' spoken styles (such as contractions) with more formal vocabulary
2. Avoid rhetorical questions the reader cannot answer
3. Use full words instead of contractions
4. Avoid unspecified categories
5. Avoid colloquial language

Example

For example, this passage contains some informal words (going, good, tell, though, really), a rhetorical question (How good…?), a contraction (can't), a vague category (etc.) and a colloquialism (first-class, top notch, check out):

- *The investigation has been going for four years. How good has it been? At this stage, researchers can't tell, because they still need to check out the data to account for differences in age, gender, socio-economic-status, etc. Once that work is done though, the information will be really first-class.*

Using the tips above, you could improve this passage by using more formal vocabulary, removing the rhetorical question, writing words in full, elaborating on the vague category and removing the colloquialism as seen below:

- *The investigation has been **underway** for four years. Researchers cannot yet **determine** the **effectiveness** of the project because it is necessary to first **analyse** the data to control for age, gender, socio-economic status **and other demographic variables**. **Despite** this, the information collected is expected to be **highly valuable** for future studies.*

Key tip

Online learner's dictionaries that provide examples of how words are used in context can help you determine the formality of specific words. If a word has many possible meanings, or appears in many idioms, it is more likely to be informal.

Anon, Four key features of academic style. *The University of Melbourne*. Available at: https://students.unimelb.edu.au/academic-skills/explore-our-resources/developing-an-academic-writing-style/key-features-of-academic-style [Accessed September 19, 2022].

PRECISION

To communicate your meaning precisely, you should try to:

Include a sufficient high level of detail and specificity

The amount of detail you provide depends on the purpose of your work, but you should always try to avoid ambiguity.

Example

The following sentence is very broad and general, which makes it sound like a personal opinion.

- *Most people didn't like changing trains on the way to work, but they still thought it was better than taking a bus.*

How many people are 'most'? How strong is their dislike of changing trains? In what way are trains better than buses?

To make it more precise, the writer could specify exactly which group of people they are referring to, what their preferences were, and the degree of strength of those preferences.

- *While **the majority of the survey respondents** indicated their dislike of changing trains on their commute to work, they **preferred** taking **two trains** to taking **one bus**, which **they perceived** would be **slower** overall and **less comfortable**, or **both**.*

The additional detail in the sentence above clearly makes the message more precise.

Choose verbs that express concepts succinctly

Certain verbs are considered too imprecise for academic writing, in that they do not provide detailed, exact meaning we require. These include verbs that are commonly used in less formal contexts, particularly those with many possible meanings and multi-word verbs.

Verbs with many possible meanings include 'do', 'make', 'put', 'keep', 'have' and 'get'. For example, some of the many possible meanings of 'get' are:

- Receive (get an email)
- Obtain (get a better view)
- Bring (get a bucket and mop)
- Buy (get a new shirt)
- Arrive (get there at 7pm)

If you use the single verb that expresses exactly what you mean by 'get', your writing will be more precise.

> ## Example
>
> The researchers **got** results from a large participant group
>
> Vs.
>
> The researchers **obtained** results from a large participant group

Multi-word verbs are verbs that require more than one word to create meaning, including phrasal and prepositional verbs, for example:

Cut off, find out, give up, hand out, let down, pick out.

Again, try to use a single verb with the same meaning instead, such as:

Discontinue, discover, quit, distribute, disappoint, select.

Use a dictionary and/or a thesaurus to find suitable alternatives for imprecise or multi-word verbs.

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HEDGING

Hedging language in academic writing is used to express caution and avoid strong, unqualified statements that may be easily disproven.

To avoid generalisations, you can:

- Use a quantifier (e.g. few, many, some)
- Use adverbs or adverbial phrases (e.g. occasionally, often, usually)
- Use modal verbs (e.g. can, may, might, would, could)

Example

The following claim is quite strong:

Leading a sedentary lifestyle causes chronic health conditions.

You could avoid overstating the relationship using the hedging tips above as follows:

***Extended** physical inactivity **can** contribute to **a range of** chronic health conditions and **may** have a negative effect on mental health.*

Cautious but inclusive statements, like the one above, may be challenged but not easily dismissed.

Final tip

This page outlines some tips to help you incorporate four key features of academic style into your writing. Another way to become familiar with these features is to look for them in the academic texts you are reading in your studies.

- How do authors express their views objectively?
- What formal and precise vocabulary is used?
- How do authors avoid making generalisations?

The more you look for these aspects of writing in academic texts you are reading, the more easily you will be able to incorporate those features into your own writing.

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