

A Guide to Style in Academic Writing

How professional is your essay and report writing?

Avoid these common errors which are all features of INFORMAL, SPOKEN English and inappropriate for academic writing.

A. Don't (do not!) use contractions: *it's, isn't, doesn't, can't, won't*, etc.

Use the full forms: *it is, is not, does not, cannot, will not*.

B. Do not personalise: do not address the reader as "you", e.g.,

When *you* write an essay, *you* need to follow certain conventions.

Rewrite, for example: Writing an essay involves following certain conventions.

Moreover, do not refer to yourself in an essay. e.g., *I* used the following sources.

Rewrite, for example, the following sources were used.

C. Do not use imperatives (orders) – these too are informal:

e.g., *Make sure* passwords are changed regularly

Rewrite, for example:

It is essential that passwords are changed regularly.

D. Do not start a sentence with a simple conjunction, *And, But* or *So*.

Find more formal alternatives. e.g., *In addition, Moreover; However; Consequently*.

E. Avoid rhetorical questions. These are inappropriate for academic writing; the point can be made more strongly and clearly expressed as a statement.

e.g., *How far are poverty and health linked?*

Rewrite, for example:

A central issue raised by this essay is to what extent health and poverty are linked.

F. Avoid abbreviations such as *etc, i.e., e.g.*; use the full forms (and so on, that is, for example).

G. Do not use colloquial expressions, that is, clichés and phrases used in everyday spoken language; 'get' is one of the most common words we find in spoken language, and can have various meanings, e.g., obtain, acquire, purchase, etc. There is always a more formal equivalent. For example: get together → unite, collaborate, meet; get in/into → enter, etc.

Avoid, for example:

like → such as

just → simply / merely

a bit → a little / rather

lots of/ plenty of → many / a large number of

a lot of → much / a great deal of / a large amount of

huge → large / significant / considerable, etc

Note also that some adjectives such as *nice, nasty, awful, lovely, terrible*, and so on, sound too judgemental. Use a more objective alternative, such as 'pleasant', 'unacceptable', 'intolerable'.

H. Use noun phrases. Academic writing tends to be '*nouny*'. At a basic level, replace 'wh' parts of a sentence with noun phrases where possible.

For example, Victorian theories of criminality tended to be based on *what a person looked like*.

Rewrite as: Victorian theories of criminality tended to be based on a person's appearance.

Example 2: The advantage of small group tutorials is that a student can better understand *what is going on*.

Rewrite as: The advantage of small group tutorials is that a student can better understand the topic and tasks.

Example 3: Even now, researchers do not know exactly *how it works*.

Rewrite as: Even now, researchers do not know the exact mechanism of action.

I. Avoid short, two-word phrases (verbs and nouns)

Instead of *think about* use consider. Instead of *get through*, use survive or connect.

Example: Dieters often feel that they should totally *get rid of* high-fat and high-sugar foods

Rewrite: Dieters often feel that they should totally eliminate.....

I. Words and phrases of Latin origin, *in vivo*, *in vitro*, *et al*, *ibid*, and so on, are italicised.

J. Use formal negative forms, e.g.,

Not...any → no. The study *didn't* offer *any* new results

Rewrite: The study offered no new results

Not...much → little

There is *not much* public interest in deregulation.

Rewrite: There is little public interest in deregulation.

Not... many → few

Not many people are prepared to change their lifestyle to be more environmentally friendly.

Rewrite: Few people are prepared to change their lifestyle to be more environmentally friendly.

K. Abbreviations

Keep their use to a minimum. When you do use them, write the words in full the first time, followed by the abbreviation in brackets, for example, Public-Private Partnerships (PPPs). Do not put full stops in initials or abbreviations.

Follow up: For further practice on style, see Andy Gillett's Website, 'Using English for Academic Purposes' at www.uefap.co.uk/writing; and *Language to Avoid checklist*, Unilearning, at <http://unilearning.uow.edu.au>

See also Swales J and C Feak, (2012) *Academic Writing for Graduate Students*, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.