

Writing in an Academic Style Module: Introduction

What is Academic Style?

Writing tasks are different across different academic disciplines and to some extent the language use will be quite different from one subject to another. However, there are some aspects of writing for university studies which are common to all. In this course we will focus on characteristic features of successful academic style across the disciplines.

Written texts used in most academic contexts need to be:

impersonal	to sound objective
clear	easy for the reader to understand
formal	to sound authoritative
well-organised	signalling relationships between ideas and facts.




Who is this module for?

All students at university who need to improve their knowledge of Academic Style in order to write more clearly and accurately.

What does this module cover?

Unit 1	Sounding Impersonal
Unit 2	Sounding Formal
Unit 3	Writing Clear Paragraphs

Exercises

These are marked with the icon  and you should try to complete them before checking your work in the **Answer Key**, marked  .

Answer Key to all Exercises

This can be found at the end of the Unit.

Writing in an Academic Style

Unit 2: Sounding Formal

1.0 Introduction

Read the following short pieces of student writing. Which sounds more 'formal' in to you? Why?

Text 1

I think that migrants have worse health than other Australians do because they don't speak English and haven't got any recognised education so they have to get jobs like labouring. This leads them into the lower social classes and they haven't got money for good food or health care. (Student text)

Text 2

The state of the Parties in the first Commonwealth Parliament made agreement inevitable. Indeed, from 1901 to 1910 none of the three parties was able to win an absolute majority in the House of Representatives. In the first election in 1901 the Liberal Protectionists won thirty-two seats, the Conservative Free-traders twenty-seven, and Labor sixteen. (Manning Clark, *A Short History of Australia*, 1986)

When we compare the writing styles of Texts 1 and 2, it is obvious that Text 2 is written in a more 'formal' style and therefore sounds more authoritative. This formal style, typical of academic writing, is what we will explore further in this unit.

Objectives of Unit 2

After you have completed this unit you should be able to:

- identify some of the features of informal and formal writing styles
- produce writing which sounds formal.

In order to achieve an 'academic' or authoritative style of writing, the following strategies should be observed:

1.1 Strategies for writing in an academic style

- Use the **technical** terms of your discipline not everyday non-technical vocabulary
- Use **formal** rather than everyday vocabulary
- Avoid conversational language so that your writing sounds '**written**' not 'spoken'.

★ Exercise 1

Circle anything in the language that sounds inappropriate for an academic style:

1. It is important to get rid of impurities so a lot of effort has gone into figuring out the best method of refinement.
2. How can immigrants get equal treatment and a fair go? Discrimination isn't just in the workplace it is part and parcel of everyday life too.
3. A big problem with Roger's therapy is the length of time the therapy takes.

★ ★ You can now check the answers in the Answer Key at the back of the unit.

1.1.1 Use formal rather than everyday vocabulary

From the examples we have been looking at, it is possible to identify a number of language features which can be classed as too 'informal' for an academic style.

Avoid an overuse of phrasal verbs

Phrasal verbs are an essential part of the English language - especially spoken language. They are a combination of the following: verb + adverb; verb + preposition; or verb + adverb and preposition. For example, *break down*, *give up*, *blow over*, *take off*.

★ Exercise 2

What would be more formal ways of expressing the phrasal verbs in the following sentences? Usually a more formal synonym, often a single word, can be substituted and sometimes the sentence will need to be changed. The phrasal verbs have been underlined to help identify them.

1. Several important variables were left out.
2. The committee was set up to look into all these problems and wind the legal proceedings up.
3. It is important to get rid of impurities so a lot of effort has gone into figuring out the best method of refinement.
4. The students get a lot out of their teaching practice sessions.

★ ★ You can now check the answers in the Answer Key at the back of the unit.

Avoid use of informal, everyday descriptors

e.g. *big, little, bad, a lot of*

Example:

A **big** problem with Rogers' counselling method is the length of time the therapy takes.

A **significant** problem with Rogers' counselling method is the length of time therapy takes.

Rewrite the following sentences and replace the underlined descriptors with a more academic synonym.

★ Exercise 3

1. One of the bad points about such drugs is the possibility of uncomfortable side effects.
2. It is important to eliminate impurities so a lot of effort has been expended to determine the best means of refinement.

★ ★ You can now check the answers in the Answer Key at the back of the unit.

1.1.2 Avoid conversational language

Colloquial vocabulary and idioms:

e.g. *part and parcel, a fair go*

★ Exercise 4

1. By and large, despite all the hype, the policy remains unchanged.
2. These are now becoming trendy suburbs for young people.
3. This is reckoned to be the greatest challenge, but the truth of the matter is that economic problems will be far more difficult to fix.

★ ★ You can now check the answers in the Answer Key at the back of the unit.

Contractions

e.g. *aren't, don't, can't*

These are acceptable in a formal spoken presentation but never in formal writing.

Rhetorical questions

e.g. *How does this compare with the Australian situation?*

Disciplines and departments will vary in the extent to which rhetorical questions are an acceptable way to raise issues. While they are certainly acceptable in a formal spoken presentation, they should not be overused in a formal written context; particularly as a means of structuring a long dissertation.

Conversational 'intensifiers' and expressions of judgement

Intensifiers

just, simply
really + adjective

Expressions of judgement

surely, maybe
okay, alright

★ Exercise 5

Rewrite the following sentences avoiding the use of the underlined conversational intensifiers and/or expressions of judgement.

1. Television viewers can just sit there and enjoy really good entertainment.
2. Surely it can be concluded that the model operates with an inadequate definition of culture.
3. These methods of helping patient seem all right but they have not been properly tested.

★ ★ You can now check the answers in the Answer Key at the back of the unit.

Conversational 'linkers'

Examples

Discrimination isn't just in the workplace but is part of everyday life too.

The hypothesis that this type of personality would often be involved in violent crimes was not supported, but at any rate the value of personality studies has been demonstrated from this research.

★ Exercise 6

To consolidate the points in 1.1.1 and 1.1.2, rewrite the following short extract in a written formal academic style.

What influence does all this have on children? Some people say that if the bad consequences of violence are shown on TV, children aren't going to copy them. This sounds all right, but maybe the bad consequences themselves will be violent too and the children will end up exposed to even more violence on the screen.

★ ★ You can now check the answers in the Answer Key at the back of the unit.

2.0 Sentence Structure in formal writing

So far we have been concentrating on words, phrases and grammatical items that can make a piece of writing more or less formal in style. Another very important aspect of formal style concerns the way in which sentences are structured.

★ Exercise 7

Read the following sentences and decide which versions within A and B sound:

- simple
- spoken
- formal

What is the reason for your decision?

A Smoking on public transport

Version 1A:

Sometimes people smoke on buses, taxis and planes. Other people may complain. They also complain when the windows are open.

Simple/Spoken/Formal? Why?

Version 2A:

Most people who do not smoke complain when other people are allowed to smoke on a bus or plane, even if fresh air is blowing through.

Simple/Spoken/Formal? Why?

Version 3A:

The majority of non-smokers object to smoking on public transport even when ventilation is adequate.

Simple/ Spoken/Formal? Why?

B: Committee hearing on level of English necessary for obtaining a taxi licence.

Version 1B:

New immigrants may not speak English properly. They often drive taxis for a living. Many people say that they should not have a licence. The committee has heard this view.

Simple/Spoken/Formal? Why?

Version 2B:

Many people have argued that if immigrants cannot speak English properly, then they should not be given taxi licences, and this position was recently put forward to the Committee.

Simple/Spoken/Formal? Why?

Version 3B:

The popular argument that immigrants without sufficient command of English should be denied taxi licences was recently heard by the Committee.

or

The Committee recently heard the popular argument that immigrants without sufficient command of English should be denied taxi licences.

Simple/Spoken/Formal? Why?

KEY to Exercise 7:

For both A and B:

Versions 1 sound "unsophisticated" because each sentence only contains one fact.

Versions 2 sound "spoken" because so many clauses are linked into a single sentence.

Versions 3 sound "formal" because a great deal of information has been packed into a single clause.

2.1 Consolidation

Let's look to see how this is done, reading the following two versions again.

Versions two are of typical spoken language whereby many clauses are linked into a single sentence. The information contained in each fragment is more sparse than in Versions 3.

Count how many verbs in each version (4). This means there are 4 clauses in the sentence. How many conjunctions are used? (3)

Version 2:

Many people **have argued** // that if immigrants
verb conj.
cannot speak English properly, then they
verb conj.
should not be given taxi licences, and this
verb conj.
position **was put forward** recently to the Committee.
verb

Version 3, on the other hand, is characteristic of written formal language because of the density of information within the sentence and the corresponding reduction of clauses.

Version 3:

The popular argument that immigrants without a
sufficient command of English **should be denied**
verb
taxi licences **was heard** recently by the Committee.
verb

2.1 Using nouns and nominal groups

An important difference between the two versions is that the writer has used nouns and nominal groups in versions 3 instead of verbs, for example:

Verbs	Nouns /Nominal groups
have argued ->	<i>the argument</i>
cannot speak English properly ->	<i>without adequate command of English</i>

This leads to other changes:

Many people ->	<i>The popular argument</i>
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Version 2:

Many people have argued that *if immigrants cannot speak English properly, then they should not be given taxi licences, and this position was put forward recently to the Committee.*

Version 3:

The popular argument that *immigrants without a sufficient command of English should be denied taxi licences* was heard recently by the Committee.

Note: In Version 3 the important information is contained in one clause with a long subject:

The popular argument that immigrants should be denied taxi licences...

It is important to be able to produce language like Versions 3, especially in introductions, conclusions and summaries.

 **Exercise 8**

Practise producing nominal groups that are packed with information.

Reduce the following pairs of clauses to a single clause, thereby omitting the conjunction. Follow these 2 steps.

i) Turn the underlined word into a noun:

e.g. People observed the side effects, such as nausea and headaches and this led to an investigation.

Observation of side effects such as nausea and headaches...



ii) Add what is necessary to the clause to complete the sentence.

e.g. People observed the side effects, such as nausea and headaches and this led to an investigation.

Observation of side effects such as nausea and headaches led to an investigation.

Now do the following sentences in the same way.

1. The department advertised that there were vacant positions. However, this did not produce any outstanding applicants.
2. When teachers expect girls to dislike maths, then that may cause girls to dislike it.
3. Many laboratory monkeys have died while being experimented on, and so the Animal Welfare lobby has protested vigorously.

  You can now check the answers in the Answer Key at the back of the unit.

Unit 2: Answer Key to Exercises

★ ★ Exercise 1: Answer

1. It is important to get rid of impurities so a lot of effort has gone into figuring out the best method of refinement.

It is important to remove impurities so considerable effort has been directed at the optimal method of refinement.

2. How can immigrants get equal treatment and a fair go? Discrimination isn't just in the workplace it is part and parcel of everyday life too.

How can immigrants be given equal treatment? Discrimination is found not only in the workplace but it is also a facet of everyday life.

3. A big problem with Roger's counselling method is the length of time the therapy takes.

A major problem of Roger's counselling method is the duration of the therapy.

★ ★ Exercise 2: Answer

1. Several important variables were omitted.
2. The committee was established to look into all these problems and conclude the legal proceedings.
3. It is important to eliminate impurities so considerable effort has been expended in determining the best method of refinement.
4. The students gain a great deal from/benefit greatly from their teaching practice sessions.

★ ★ Exercise 3: Answer

1. One of the negative points about such drugs is the possibility of uncomfortable side effects.
2. It is important to eliminate impurities so considerable effort has been expended to determine the best means of refinement.

★ ★ Exercise 4: Answer

1. By and large, despite all the hype, the policy remains unchanged.
Generally, despite all the publicity, the policy remains unchanged.
2. These are now becoming trendy suburbs for young people.

These are now becoming fashionable suburbs for young people.

3. This is reckoned to be the greatest challenge but the truth of the matter is that economic problems will be far more difficult to fix.

This is considered to be the greatest challenge but the reality is that economic problems will be far more difficult to solve.

★ ★ Exercise 5: Answer

1. Television viewers can sit and enjoy good entertainment.
2. It can be concluded that the model operates with an inadequate definition of culture.
3. These methods of helping patients seem reasonable but they have not been properly tested.

★ ★ Exercise 6: Answer

The influence of television violence on children needs to be considered. It is often argued that if the negative consequences of violence are shown on television then children will not copy them. While this seems reasonable, the negative consequences might themselves lead to a greater exposure to violence on the screen.

★ ★ Exercise 7: Answer

See p.7

★ ★ Exercise 8: Answer

1. The department advertised that there were vacant positions. However, this did not produce any outstanding applicants.

The Department's advertisement for the vacant positions did not produce any outstanding applicants.

2. When teachers expect girls to dislike maths, then that may cause girls to dislike it.

A teacher's expectation that girls will dislike maths may cause girls to dislike it/ be self-fulfilling.

3. Many laboratory monkeys have died while being experimented on, and so the Animal Welfare lobby has protested vigorously.

Following the deaths of laboratory monkeys during experimentation there have been vigorous protests by the Animal Welfare Lobby.