

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 1: Sounding Impersonal

1.0 Introduction

Discipline areas in universities vary in the extent to which they insist on an impersonal style. But while a 'personal' style is occasionally acceptable, an impersonal style is **always** acceptable (and it is often obligatory).

Objectives of Unit 1

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

- recognise and produce writing which has these four characteristics above: impersonal, clear, formal, well-organised.
- work on both grammatical patterns and on larger patterns of text organisation.

We'll start with an exercise to practice recognising patterns of academic style.

Exercise 1

Read the following short pieces of student writing. Note anything which sounds unsatisfactory to you, including grammatical errors.

Which sounds more 'academic' in style to you? Why?

Text 1

After examined the U.N. report (1976) it is indicated that a child will find it difficult to learn to read in a language which he does not speak. It can be known from this report that in the 1970s many migrant children in Australia are likely failed because they were instructed in a strange language.

Problems

Text 2

I am convinced that migrant children are not very successful in our education system because we do not have bilingual education programmes. I doubt whether any of us would do well in school if we did not understand everything that went on in the lessons. I agree with the U.N. report on language and education (1976), that we should let children become literate in their own language first, to give them the greatest chance of educational success.

Problems

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

1.1 Avoiding the use of personal pronouns

1. To sound impersonal you should avoid referring to yourself or your reader with **I** or **you** (substituting with **we** or **one** is not recommended).
2. It is also preferable to avoid talking about people 'feeling' or 'believing'.

1.1.1 The Grammar of Impersonal Style: the passive voice.

One way of sounding impersonal and objective is to use **the passive voice** and omit reference to yourself. Passive voice is frequently used in academic writing when we are more interested in events and processes than in the 'doer' of an action. For example:

1. when reporting what you did:

We cut a segment out of the apple and placed it in an agar solution.
*A segment **was cut out** of the apple and placed in an agar solution.*

2. when referring to what you have said:

Dr J. is an acupuncturist, which I have mentioned already, so many patients come for this sort of treatment.
*As **(has been) mentioned** already, Dr L. is an acupuncturist, so many patients...*

★ Exercise 2

Try rewriting the sentences below in the passive voice. Make sure you can control the use of the passive in all tenses (see Table 1 below).

1. *I had already interviewed the subject when his wife contacted him.*

2. *We were monitoring the reaction carefully all the time.*

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

Another way is to use an impersonal passive form e.g. '*it can be seen that...*' when signalling that a conclusion is being drawn.

When applying the value list to East Asia, one can easily find that critical values are left off the list.

When the value list is applied to East Asia, ***it can easily be seen that...***

Table 1: Active voice and passive equivalents in different tenses.

<u>Tense/verb form</u>	<u>Active voice</u>	<u>Passive voice</u>
Simple present	keeps	is kept
Present continuous	is keeping	is being kept
Simple past	kept	was kept
Past continuous	was keeping	was being kept
Present perfect	has kept	has been kept
Past perfect	had kept	had been kept
Future	will keep	will be kept
Conditional	would keep	would be kept
Perfect conditional	would have kept	would have been kept
Present infinitive	to keep	to be kept

★ Exercise 3

Here is some additional practice in transforming active clauses to passive ones. Be careful to use the same tense as in the active sentence.

1. We should examine the statistics more carefully before we dismiss this claim. (Omit 'we')
2. We heat the premises by electricity. (Omit 'we')
3. In some districts farmers use pigs to find truffles.
4. They are excavating additional sites. (Omit 'they')
5. Why didn't they use a control group? (Omit 'they')
6. They have disregarded all the evidence in the new report. (Omit 'they')

7. They said that they were starting a new study because many people had criticised the earlier one. (Omit 'they' and 'people')
8. The study will involve 50 subjects between the ages of 35 and 60.
9. Someone has written a special version for children. (Omit 'someone')
10. People think that the best scientists should teach science, although less talented people can teach humanities. (Omit 'people')
11. Most researchers have found that they could not duplicate Smith's results. (Omit 'most researchers')
12. Psychologists claim that these experiments are dangerous. (Omit 'psychologists')

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

★ Exercise 4

- a) Which of the following verbs can be used in this structure:
it can be ---- that ----?

From all these recent studies it can be ---- that the peer group pressure is a very important factor in adolescent drug taking.

see	learn
find	know
discover	argue
believe	suggest
conclude	decide

- b) Now rewrite the following sentence.

If we can examine these statistics, we can learn that the number of young female smokers is increasing.

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

1.2 Other techniques for sounding impersonal

- i) Make the evidence 'show' the conclusion when signalling that a conclusion is being drawn.

After discussing Richard's case we can see that retirement is a serious matter for elderly people.

Richard's case shows that retirement is a serious matter.

★ Exercise 5

Rewrite the following sentences with a verb that signals when a conclusion is being drawn.

1. From this evidence, we know that the female patients are more likely to suffer from stress.
-

2. When we look at these figures, we can learn that nearly 40% of married women were in the workforce at that time.
-

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

- ii) Refer to your piece of writing as doing something when stating your intentions, plan or purposes (not 'I')

I wish to raise a number of issues relating to this second point.
This paper will raise a number of issues related to this second point.

★ Exercise 6

Rewrite the following sentences so that your writing states the intentions of the paper.

1. I hope to show that this form of counselling has many advantages.
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2. In this paper, I intend to describe the two theories and explain how they are related.
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★ ★ You can now check the answers in the Answer Key at the back of the unit.

★ Exercise 7

Read the following text and rewrite it in your own words using ACCURATE impersonal language.

In this section I wish to summarise the evidence concerning involuntary or passive smoking. As I have reviewed above, researchers disagree about the dangers to non-smokers of inhaling other people's cigarette smoke. If we consider the experimental work by Rogers (1990) we can discover that dogs exposed to sidestream smoke developed respiratory symptoms even more rapidly than dogs inhaling cigarettes directly. On the other hand we

should consider the more recent statistical research by Smith & Peters (2000) in which we can see that 'passive smokers' have the same rates of death by lung cancer as non-smokers.

1.3 Express your judgement in an impersonal way

Some examples of personal expression of judgement:

I think; I feel; I believe; I guess; I'm sure that...; I am convinced that...

There are a number of alternatives to create a more objective and impersonal expression of ideas:

1.3.1 Use MODAL VERBS and/or MODAL ADVERBS

<u>Use modal verbs:</u>	<u>and/or</u>	<u>modal adverbs</u>
MUST	<i>strong</i>	CERTAINLY UNDOUBTEDLY
WILL	<i>moderate</i>	PROBABLY
MAY MIGHT COULD	<i>tentative</i>	POSSIBLY

Examples:

I think the unions are unrealistic in their demands.

The unions may be unrealistic in their demands.

I imagine the Permanent Secretary has this information.

The Permanent Secretary will (probably) have this information.

1.3.2 Use seem(ed)/appear to

Tentative meaning using 'seem/appear to' can be made stronger or weaker in meaning as follows.

It	is seems appears	certain clear obvious	that the city was destroyed.	(STRONG)
It	is seems appears	likely probable	that the city was destroyed.	(MODERATE)
It	is seems appear	possible	that the city was destroyed.	(TENTATIVE)

I think the unions are unrealistic in their demands.
The unions seem to be unrealistic in their demands.

★ Exercise 8

How would you use **it is/seems(ed)...** **that** in the following:

1. I'm sure that this kind of methodology caused the uneven results.

2. I guess that aboriginal design will be incorporated into mainstream Australian art in the near future.

3. I think the generals made rash decisions at that time.

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

★ Exercise 9

Rewrite the following text using an impersonal style.

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 many months or years in school but did not understand their lessons. I am convinced that many migrant children are failing in our education system because we do not have bilingual education programs. 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 that the government has done little to help these children. Surely the best way to achieve this in Australia is for the State governments to set up bilingual education programs for all migrant children. I would suggest this is the number one important issue for multicultural Australia.

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

Unit 1: Answer Key to Exercises

★ ★ Exercise 1: Answer

Text 1 Problems:

- 1) **Grammar errors:** 'After examined the UN report (1976) it is indicated; are likely failed because they were instructed'
- 2) **Unsuccessful use of the passive voice:** 'It can be known...'
- 3) **Inappropriate choice of adjective:** 'strange'
- 4) **Gender specific use of language:** 'he' (rather than a non-specific gender reference such as 'they', 'the child/children' or 'he/she').

Text 2 Problems:

- 1) **Use of personal language:** 'I am convinced'; 'I doubt whether...'; 'I agree...'; 'our education system...'; 'because we did not have...'; 'any of us...'; 'if we did not...'; 'that we should let...'
- 2) **Personal judgements expressed:** 'I am convinced'; 'I doubt whether...'; 'I agree...'
- 3) **Use of informal language:** 'do well in school...'; 'went on...'; 'we should let children...'; 'to give them...'

Text 1 sounds more academic. This is despite the grammatical errors in the text. The writer has attempted to use elements in their writing which create a more impersonal, objective text. For example, the writer has avoided the use of personal references such as 'I' and 'you' and the expression of personal judgements. They have also attempted to use passive forms, albeit not very successfully as in the cases: 'it is indicated that...' and 'it can be known that...'

In addition, the writer of Text 1 has allowed the evidence to present and support the argument unlike Text 2, which foregrounds the writer's judgements and opinions.

★ ★ Exercise 2: Answer

1. The subject had already been interviewed when his wife contacted him.
2. The reaction was being monitored carefully all the time.

★ ★ Exercise 3: Answer

1. The statistics should be examined more carefully before this claim is dismissed.
2. The premises are heated by electricity.
3. In some districts pigs are used by farmers to find truffles.

4. Additional sites are being excavated.
5. Why wasn't a control group used?
6. All the evidence has been disregarded in the new report.
7. A new study is being started because the earlier one had been criticised.
8. Fifty subjects between the ages of 35 and 60 will be involved in the study.
9. A special version for children has been written.
10. It is thought that the best scientists should teach science, although less talented people can teach humanities.
11. It has been found that Smith's results could not be duplicated.
12. It is claimed that these experiments are dangerous.

★ ★ **Exercise 4: Answer**

it can be ---- seen/argued/concluded that ----

- a) From all these recent studies it can be **seen/argued/concluded** that the peer group pressure is a very important factor in adolescent drug taking.
- b) From an examination of these statistics, it can be seen/argued, concluded that the number of young female smokers is increasing.

★ ★ **Exercise 5: Answer**

1. This evidence shows/indicates that the female patients are more likely to suffer from stress.
2. These figures show/demonstrate/indicate that nearly 40% of married women were in the workforce at that time.

★ ★ **Exercise 6: Answer**

1. This paper will show that I hope to show that this form of counselling has many advantages.
2. This paper intends to describe the two theories and explain how they are related.

★ ★ Exercise 7: Answer

This section will summarise the evidence concerning involuntary or passive smoking. As reviewed above, researchers disagree about the dangers to non-smokers of inhaling other people's cigarette smoke. If the experimental work by Rogers (1990) is considered, it can be seen that dogs exposed to sidestream smoke developed respiratory symptoms even more rapidly than dogs inhaling cigarettes directly. On the other hand, considering the more recent statistical research by Smith & Peters (2000) it can be seen that 'passive smokers' have the same rates of death by lung cancer as non-smokers.

★ ★ Exercise 8: Answer

1. It seems certain that this kind of methodology caused the uneven results.
2. It seems possible that aboriginal design will be incorporated into mainstream Australian art in the near future.
3. The generals seemed to have made rash decisions at that time.

★ ★ Exercise 9: Answer

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 many 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 there are no bilingual education programs. 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 on 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 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 programs for all migrant children. It is suggested that this is the number one important issue for multicultural Australia.