Academic Writing Style

Academic writing style is used in scholarly settings, encompassing a variety of genres including essays, literature reviews, research proposals, and laboratory reports. Although each discipline contains its own jargon and style of writing, all academic writing shares certain conventions.

Academic writing is structured.

Each academic genre has specific guidelines that may differ across disciplines. For example, a standard essay is composed of an introduction with a strong thesis statement, a number of body paragraphs that each develop a separate idea, and a conclusion that restates the main points. A longer research paper may include multiple paragraphs for each aspect of the main thesis. Most students are asked to format their writing in a common academic style, for example, APA, MLA, or Chicago. You should always ask your professor for the specific length, structure, and style they expect in their writing assignments.

Academic writing employs formal language.

a.   It avoids verbal contractions:
- *Peer-reviewed psychology studies <u>can't</u> be compared to popular magazine articles. <u>They're</u> not considered credible. → Peer-reviewed psychology studies <u>cannot</u> be compared to popular magazine articles. <u>They are</u> not considered credible.*

b.   It avoids colloquial language, phrasal verbs, and idioms:
- *In a survey, 76% of students reported that they feel <u>great (colloquial)</u> about their futures. → In a survey, 76% of students reported that they feel <u>optimistic (academic)</u> about their futures.*
- *The instructor <u>called off (phrasal verb)</u> the exam today because she feels <u>under the weather (idiom)</u>. → The instructor <u>postponed (academic)</u> the exam today because she feels <u>ill (academic)</u>.*

c.   It avoids first and second person pronouns (*I, we, you*) to create neutral distance between the reader or the writer and the text:
- *<u>I</u> think that <u>we</u> at Bishop's should eliminate final exams. → Bishop's faculty should eliminate final exams.*
- *As students, <u>you</u> need to keep track of <u>your</u> assignments. → Students need to keep track of their assignments.*

   NB: APA allows for the use of *I* and *we* in certain contexts. Check with your professor.

Academic writing is clear and concise.

a.   It uses subject-specific vocabulary:
   Each academic discipline has its own group of specialized or technical vocabulary. For

example, botanists do not discuss how plants *make food* but how plants *photosynthesize*. A *class* in biology is not a group of students but a taxonomic grouping of species. Students need to understand these specialized words and incorporate them into their writing.

b. It uses precise vocabulary:
- Change the stative verbs *be* and *have* into more precise active ones:
  Jason <u>has</u> a doctorate in music. → Jason <u>earned</u> his doctorate in music.
- Change the colloquial verb *get* into another more precise verb:
  The Dean <u>got</u> an interesting email this morning. → The Dean <u>received</u> an interesting email this morning.
- Replace general adjectives, such as *good, bad, big*, and *small*, with meaningful ones:
  Marie exemplifies the qualities of a <u>good</u> student. → Marie exemplifies the qualities of a <u>conscientious</u> student.

c. It avoids unnecessary words:
- redundant pairs (paired words that have the same meaning), for example:
  past history, true fact, free gift
- wordy expressions, for example:
  due to the fact that → because, despite the fact that → although

d. It uses strong subjects:
Academic writing avoids the use of *it is* and *there is/are* as subjects and verbs. These weak combinations usually refer to another word or phrase in the same sentence, for example:
- *<u>It is</u> by incorporating new technologies that we can save the planet. → We can save the planet by incorporating new technologies.*
- *<u>There are</u> a multitude of ways to improve your academic writing. → You can improve your academic writing in a multitude of ways.*

Academic writing is evidenced-based.

Academic writing is evidence-based and not subject to feelings and opinions. In academic assignments, students describe then critically analyze and evaluate research and ideas, they construct logical arguments, and they support their writing with academic references. If opinions are included in an academic paper, they must be supported by scholarly sources.

Students must never use another scholar's words as their own; therefore, all references - including any use of generative artificial intelligence - in an academic text must be properly cited. Otherwise, the student risks being accused of plagiarism.

Academic writing is grammatically correct.

If students want to be taken seriously, the grammar used in their writing must be flawless. An interesting idea that is poorly written is wasted. Writing applications all have spelling and grammar checkers that students should use before submitting a text. Reading a text aloud is also an efficient way to spot grammar errors, including sentence construction errors.

For further explanation see the BU Writing Centre handouts: *Strong Subjects, Strong Verbs, Avoiding Cliches,* and *Avoiding Informal Language*.