

Unit 1

Achieving an Academic Writing Style

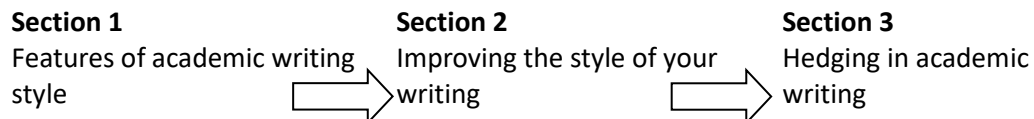
Learning Outcomes

By the end of this unit, you should be able to:

- use appropriate language to demonstrate academic style in writing
- express ideas and views in tentative rather than assertive language where appropriate

Introduction

This unit is divided into three sections providing reference and practice material on various aspects of academic writing style.



Referencing note: This unit uses **IEEE referencing style** for all in-text referencing.



In each week of this subject there are IndiWork activities on LEARN@PolyU (<https://learn.polyu.edu.hk/>). You need to do these activities as out-of-class work to successfully complete ELC1013. More information about each IndiWork activity can be found on the [IndiWork Student Guide](#) on LEARN@PolyU.

Section 1 The features of academic writing style

What do you think are the differences between the essays that you wrote at secondary school and the essays that you will need to write at university? Make sure you think about style* when considering these differences.

***Style** often refers to level of formality. For example, when writing to a friend you would use an informal style.

Activity 1 Reading

How do the language choices in this first essay draft below create a non-academic / inappropriate style?

Read the passage and identify (highlight / circle) the style problems. Note down your ideas at the end of the passage. Be prepared to share your observations with the rest of the class.

How often do PolyU students use English outside the classroom? Because many people think PolyU students don't use English much outside of class, I wanted to find out the answer to this question so I decided to do a survey. I worked out a questionnaire and then handed it out to lots of students from eight departments. The students filled in the questionnaire and then gave it back to me. I did the survey in April 2011. A total of 707 students took part in the survey, which is a really huge sample. In fact, this is the biggest survey of its kind ever done in Hong Kong which is terrific! And when I got the questionnaires back, I looked closely at the data and put it into a number of figures.

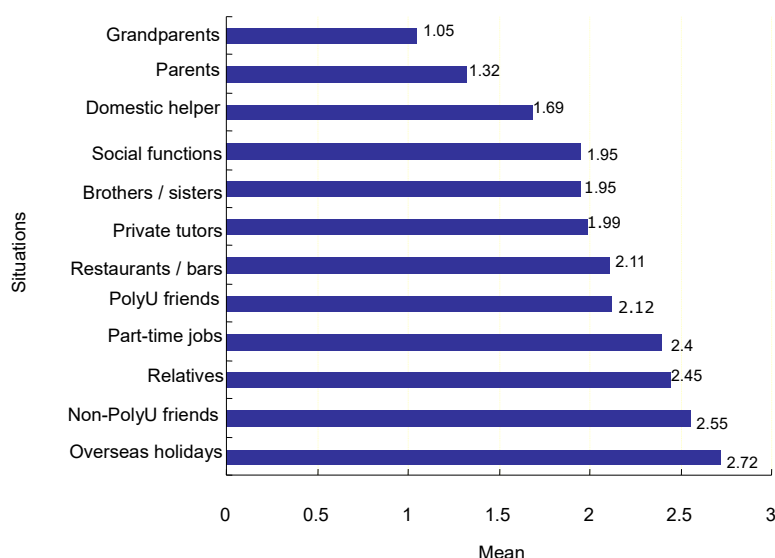


Figure 1: Speaking in English outside university

The first area I'd like to look at is speaking in English. Basically, what I wanted to know was how often students speak English outside the classroom. The questionnaire asked the students to say how often they use English when they talk to friends, parents etc. When they filled in the questionnaire, the students had to circle a number from 1 (never) to 6 (very often). If they circled the numbers 1-3, it means that they don't use English very much. If they circled the numbers 4-6, it means that they use English fairly often. As you can see, I've put all the data about speaking in English in Figure 1.

Let's now talk about the data in Figure 1. First and foremost, it's crystal clear that students don't have many opportunities to speak English outside the classroom. You can tell this because all the means are under 3.00. Clearly, PolyU students don't have any need to speak to parents etc. in English. This is undoubtedly because their family members are Cantonese speakers.

Obviously, there's no point in speaking English when everyone can speak Cantonese. As you can see, PolyU students never speak to their
 25 grandparents in English. This is not surprising because, as we all know, old
 people in Hong Kong can't speak English. That's because the education
 system wasn't very good in the past. But, you can see that there are a
 few situations (overseas holidays and so on) where students do get a golden
 opportunity to use their English, even though this is not really very often. In a
 30 nutshell, then, the data in Figure 1 prove that PolyU students don't speak
 English much outside the classroom.

Note down the style problems you found in the box below. For each problem you identify, write an appropriate solution.

Problem (inappropriate language)	Solution (appropriate language)
1.	1.
2.	2.
3.	3.
4.	4.
5.	5.
6.	6.
7.	7.
8.	8.
9.	9.
10.	10.
11.	11.

Section 2 Improving the style of your writing

In this section you will learn how to improve the style of your academic writing. Read through the following twelve subheadings and complete Activities 2 to 7.

1. Avoid informal verbs

Use formal (i.e. single-word verbs) such as **examine** rather than phrasal / multi-word verbs such as *look at*.

This report *looks at* ✗ [**examines**] ✓ the problem of juvenile delinquency.

Hong Kong has *got over* ✗ [**recovered from**] ✓ the latest recession.

University-linked companies have not *taken off* ✗ [**been successful**] ✓ in recent years.

Activity 2a Formal verbs

Fill in the blanks with five of the following formal verbs. Make sure that you put the verbs into the correct form / tense.

discover
conduct

fluctuate
establish

devise
increase

investigate
assist

reduce
discuss

- a) The team (*came up with*) _____ an imaginative solution to the problem.
- b) In this essay, I will (*talk about*) _____ the issue of genetic engineering.
- c) The study was (*carried out*) _____ between May and July 2012.
- d) A research associate was appointed to (*help out*) _____ with the analysis of the data.
- e) Researchers (*found out*) _____ that the chiller was the source of the problem.

Activity 2b Formal verbs

With a partner, write five sentences using the unused formal verbs from Activity 2a.

- a).....
- b).....
- c).....
- d).....
- e).....

2. Avoid Colloquial expressions

Avoid informal or colloquial expressions such as *a lot of* in your written assignments.

✗	✓
<i>a lot of</i> research	➔ a great deal of / a considerable amount of
<i>lots of</i> studies	➔ numerous / a large number of / myriad / a plethora of
<i>a really</i> interesting study	➔ very / extremely / particularly
<i>a bit</i> disappointing	➔ somewhat / rather / fairly
it is <i>a must</i>	➔ essential / necessary / crucial / vital

3. Avoid Clichés

Clichés are expressions that have become overused. The expressions below are dull and unoriginal. In addition, the meaning of some clichés, such as *in a nut shell*, may not be clear to a global audience as the words and meaning may not be closely related. Avoid using them in your written work.

✗	✗	✗
<i>hot topic</i>	<i>heated debate</i>	<i>last but not least</i>
<i>every coin has two sides</i>	<i>all in all</i>	<i>as we all know</i>
<i>first and foremost</i>	<i>crystal clear</i>	<i>golden opportunity</i>
<i>In a nutshell</i>	<i>financial tsunami</i>	<i>a double-edged sword</i>

4. Avoid vague, everyday language

Avoid common, informal everyday words. Use more precise words instead.

Adjectives

Pollution has been a *big* ✗ **[major]** ✓ problem in Hong Kong in the past thirty years.
 The facilities in the lecture theatre are *bad* ✗ **[inadequate]** ✓.
 The students felt she was a good ✗ **[organised / enthusiastic]** ✓ instructor.

Verbs

Bonny *got* ✗ **[obtained]** ✓ her degree from the Hong Kong Polytechnic University.
 Chan [1] *says* ✗ **[comments]** ✓ that the English standard of students is improving.

Others

This issue has raised the attention of *everyone* ✗ **[the public]** ✓.
 There are many *things* ✗ **[elements]** ✓ to a successful presentation.

5. Be objective

As well as being impersonal, academic writing should be as objective as possible. Subjective and strongly emotional language should be avoided. Do not use words such as:

fantastic, wonderful, lovely, absolutely, totally, terrific, excellent!

Objectivity can also be boosted through hedging techniques (see section 3).

Activity 3 Academic style

Change the underlined words in the following sentences to improve the style.

- a) The student did a presentation last week. b) It is a good essay.
 c) The results of the survey were shockingly bad! d) It was a poor presentation.
 e) Freedom of the Internet is a double edged sword. f) The analysts obtained a lot of data.

6. Avoid Repetition

Repeating the same words and phrases in your written assessments may make your work appear boring and unsophisticated to the reader.

To make your writing more interesting, use **appropriate** synonyms. For example:

findings	➔	results	appear	➔	seem
inquiry	➔	investigation	argue	➔	contend

Tip: When using Microsoft Word, if you right click on a word it will give you a list of synonyms that you could use. Note that not all the words will be suitable to use in a particular sentence, so you should ensure that the alternative language choices convey the meaning you intend to express. Academic writing should be easy to follow.

7. Avoid contractions

Avoid using contractions such as *it's* and *they're* in academic writing.

won't ➔ **will not** *don't* ➔ **do not** *I've* ➔ **I have**

It's ✗ [**It is**] ✓ widely acknowledged that English plays an important role in Hong Kong's business sector.

8. Avoid personal references

Avoid directly referring to yourself as *I* or *we*, or to the reader as *you*. Academic writers generally avoid using the personal pronoun *I* because it makes their work seem too subjective.

You can see the findings in Table 1. ✗
I have presented the findings in Table 1. ✗
As you can see, the findings are in Table 1. ✗
We can see the findings in Table 1. ✗
 The findings **are presented** in Table 1. ✓

The passive voice is useful for this and achieves a more impersonal, action-focused style appropriate for academic writing.

9. Avoid informal sentence starters

Starting sentences with *And*, *Because*, or *But* is considered poor style in academic writing. Use a more formal alternative instead. For example:

And —————> In addition, Apart from
 But —————> However,
 Because ———> Due to, This is because

10. Avoid rhetorical questions

Avoid using rhetorical questions as they can make your writing appear unsophisticated.

In my report, I will answer the following question: *What are the causes of stress?* ✗
 This report examines the causes of stress. ✓
 Whether exams cause stress is examined in this report. ✓

The above analysis concludes the first part of my essay regarding the problems of teenage drug abuse. *Now, how about the solutions?* ✗
 The next part of my essay examines some solutions to teenage drug abuse. ✓

Activity 4 Academic style

Improve the style of the following sentences.

- a) Has China been affected by the financial tsunami? She'd appear to be managing quite nicely.
- b) And it's high time we started to think about the wealth gap.
- c) Some business leaders make some bad business decisions.

11. Avoid 'Run-on' expressions

Limit the use of 'run-on' expressions such as *etc.* and *and so on* in academic writing. Use the term **such as** to inform the reader that not all possible examples are given.

Professionals often need to write reports, memos *etc.* at work. ✗
 Professionals often need to write documents **such as** reports and memos at work. ✓

12. Use positive forms

Avoid informal negative forms such as *not much* and *not many*. Use the positive (without 'not') forms **little** and **few**.

Not much ✗ [**Little**] ✓ research has been conducted into job stress in universities.
Not many ✗ [**Few**] ✓ studies have investigated Hong Kong society in the 19th century.

Activity 5 Academic style

There are style errors in the sentence below. Identify the error and change the language to improve the style of the sentences. Then match the error to the style issues in the box below. Most sentences have more than one problem.

emotional / subjective colloquial expressions vague / everyday cliché contraction / negativity personal reference sentence starter

- a) The problem of air pollution has become more and more serious in recent years.
- b) In the past decade, a lot of research has been done into indoor air quality.
- c) The results let everyone see that the quality of service in Hong Kong restaurants is bad.
- d) Hong Kong companies value employees who have good communication skills.
- e) And language policy in secondary schools has been a hot topic for many years.
- f) We all know that students learn better when they are taught in their mother tongue.
- g) The students didn't encounter many problems finding good data for their project.
- h) Ensuring a big sample of subjects for a questionnaire survey is a must.
- i) Researchers got their data by doing telephone interviews.
- j) Tong's [2] interpretation of the data is totally wrong.

Activity 6 Reading

The following essay is a more appropriately written academic essay than the draft analysed in Activity 1. Discuss with a partner the ways in which this passage is more academically appropriate than the earlier Activity 1 version.

Students' use of English outside university

(A) This essay investigates the perceived problem of Hong Kong students' lack of English use outside university. The data reported below were derived from a questionnaire survey of a substantial sample of first-year undergraduates from eight departments at the Hong Kong Polytechnic University.

(B) The survey was conducted between 12 and 23 April 2011. The subjects completed the questionnaire during their English for University Studies classes under the supervision of a research assistant. A total of 1,283 questionnaires were distributed and 707 correctly completed copies were returned and subsequently analysed. The questionnaire required the respondents to indicate the frequency with which they speak, listen, read and write in English outside the formal setting of the English-medium classroom.

(C) The first section of the questionnaire asked the subjects to indicate on a six-point scale how often they speak in English in a range of non-academic situations. On the evidence of the findings presented in Figure 1, it would appear that tertiary students in Hong Kong generally have little need to speak in English outside the classroom.

(D) The evidence suggests that undergraduates rarely communicate with their parents or grandparents in English. This finding is perhaps not surprising as census data indicate that the overwhelming majority of people in Hong Kong speak Cantonese [1]. In the intimate family domain, young people understandably have little need or desire to speak English, apart from special circumstances such as preparing for English language examinations.

(E) The results indicate that the situation in which tertiary students use English least is in interactions with their grandparents. When interpreting this finding, it is worth noting that recent surveys have revealed that English is less widely known among Hong Kong people in their sixties and seventies than among those in the 40-60 and 20-40 age groups [2]. This largely stems from the fact that the provision of English-medium secondary education was limited in the 1940s and 1950s [3]. The majority of citizens in the 60-70 age group are likely to have received only a Chinese-medium primary education [4].

(F) While the data in Figure 1 suggest that tertiary students tend not to speak English very frequently outside class, there are apparently several situations where spoken English has some degree of importance in the subjects' lives. As might be expected, the situation where the subjects need to speak the language most is on overseas holidays. As Cantonese is not widely spoken outside Hong Kong, it is perhaps understandable that students need to communicate in English on trips to Europe, North America and other parts of Asia.

(G) As noted above, students rarely talk to their immediate family members in English. However, it is interesting that some of the subjects apparently have some need to communicate with their relatives in English. One possible factor behind the use of English in this situation is that their relatives live in an English-speaking country. In the case of younger relatives (e.g. cousins), it is possible that they have no knowledge of Cantonese, while older relatives (e.g. uncles, aunts) may feel more comfortable using their adopted language.

Activity 7 Improving academic style

Use the academic writing advice above to complete the following exercises.

1. Skim through the Activity 6 essay and find **formal** verbs with similar meanings to the following informal phrasal verbs. The paragraph is given in brackets to help you.

filled in (B) _____ *looks into* (A) _____
handed out (B) _____ *found out* (E) _____

2. Find words in the Activity 6 passage which have similar meanings to the following vague, everyday words:

done (B) _____ *big* (A) _____
later (B) _____ *got* (A) _____

3. To avoid repeating the words **students** and **findings**, the writer uses a number of synonyms. List the synonyms used.

students: _____
findings: _____

4. How does the writer avoid using informal negative forms? Underline one example in the passage in Paragraph D.
5. The draft that you read in Activity 1 included the following inappropriate sentences:

This is not surprising because, as we all know, old people in Hong Kong can't speak English.

That's because the education system wasn't very good in the past.

How does the writer revise this part of the report?



'Li Wei falls to Hong Kong' reproduced with kind permission of Li Wei

Section 3 Hedging in academic writing

One of the main problems in the Activity 1 text is the writer's use of **assertive** (overly strong or sure) language when discussing the data.

Examples of assertive language are highlighted below.

Let's now talk about the data in Figure 1. First and foremost, it's **crystal clear** that students don't have many opportunities to speak English outside the classroom. You can tell this because all the means are under 3.00. **Clearly**, PolyU students don't have any need to speak to parents, etc. in English. This is **undoubtedly** because their family members are Cantonese speakers. **Obviously**, there's no point in speaking English when everyone can speak Cantonese. As you can see, PolyU students **never** speak to their grandparents in English. This is not surprising because, as we all know, **old people in Hong Kong can't speak English**. That's because the education system wasn't very good in the past. You can see, though, that there are a few situations (overseas holidays and so on) where students do get a golden opportunity to use their English, even though this is not really very often. In a nutshell, then, the data in Figure 1 **prove** that PolyU students don't speak English much outside the classroom.

Expressing opinions or making claims in overly strong language leaves you open to attack by critical readers. Such statements will often be doubted by readers thereby reducing your power and authority as a writer. A reader who does not believe a writer will rarely read on.

To avoid such a situation, when stating ideas or discussing data you should use **tentative** rather than **assertive** language.

You should avoid expressions such as:

clearly
undoubtedly

obviously
definitely

without a doubt
there is no doubt that

certainly
absolutely

Be very careful about using words like **always** (very common in Chinese), **never**, **every** and **all** because these suggest absolute certainty, which is inappropriate, and often incorrect, in many situations.

Compare the following sentences:

1. *The Hong Kong economy will grow next year.*
(Too strong! The writer is open to criticism if the Hong Kong economy does not grow next year.)
2. *The Hong Kong economy might grow next year.*
(Ok. The writer is hedging by using the modal verb 'might'.)
3. *Some economists believe the Hong Kong economy will grow next year.*
(Ok. The doubt is transferred to a third party (economists). This means that the readers' confidence in you is not reduced.)

Techniques used in the sentences two and three above are known as **hedging**.

Hedging Techniques

Activity 6 illustrated a number of hedging techniques. These are summarised below:

1. Use hedging verbs

The following 'hedging' verbs are often used in academic writing:

suggest indicate estimate imply

The results **indicate** that the situation in which tertiary students use English least is in interactions with their grandparents.

The verbs **appear** and **seem** are used to 'distance' the writer from the findings (and therefore avoid making a strong claim and be subject to criticism from readers).

On the evidence of the findings presented in Figure 1, **it would appear** that tertiary students in Hong Kong generally have little need to speak in English outside the classroom.

Note that the writer also 'protects' himself / herself by using the phrase **on the evidence of**. The following expressions are used in a similar way: **according to, on the basis of, based on**.

2. Use modal verbs

Another way of appearing 'confidently uncertain' is to use modal verbs such as **may, might** and **could**.

In the case of younger relatives, it is possible that they have no knowledge of Cantonese, while older relatives **may** feel more comfortable using their adopted language.

3. Use adverbs

The following adverbs are often used when a writer wishes to express caution.

probably possibly perhaps arguably
apparently seemingly presumably conceivably

This finding is **perhaps** not surprising as census data indicate that the overwhelming majority of people in Hong Kong speak Cantonese [1].

4. Use adjectives

Another technique is to use an adjective.

probable possible arguable unlikely likely

One **possible** factor behind the use of English in this situation is that their relatives live in an English-speaking country.

5. Use nouns

The following nouns are often used to hedge:

probability possibility evidence likelihood indication

The **evidence** suggests that undergraduates rarely communicate with their parents or grandparents in English.

6. Softening generalisations

There are several ways in which you can soften and hedge a generalisation.

(i) Use the verb **tend** or the noun (have / be a) **tendency** (to).

While the data in Figure 1 suggest that tertiary students **tend** not to speak English very frequently outside class, there are apparently several situations where spoken English has some degree of importance in the subjects' lives.

(ii) Use an adverb such as:

generally largely primarily for the most part
predominantly mainly usually to a great extent

This **largely** stems from the fact that the provision of English-medium secondary education was limited in the 1940s and 1950s [3].

(iii) Use a hedging expression such as **most** or **the majority of**.

The majority of citizens in the 60-70 age group are likely to have received only a Chinese-medium primary education [4].

(iv) Identify exceptions by using expressions such as **except for** or **with the exception of**.

In the intimate family domain, young people understandably have little need or desire to speak English, **except for** special circumstances such as preparing for English language examinations.

7. Avoid negative words

You should also avoid direct, negative words such as *lies, cheat, false, rubbish, cheap, useless* and *worst*. Try to use cautious, indirect language when expressing negative ideas.

Without a doubt, the *worst* aspect of Dr Wong's teaching is the lack of feedback. ✖

Giving feedback is **perhaps the least successful** aspect of Dr Wong's teaching. ✓

The president told *lies* to the media during his *rubbish* handling of the crisis. ✖

The president may have **misled** the media during the **less than satisfactory** handling of the crisis. ✓

Activity 8 Hedging

Choose the most appropriate option below.

- a) Everybody knows / It is generally accepted that all / the majority of English people always / often fail to learn any language other than their own.
- b) Perhaps / Clearly the world will / is likely to face major / total environmental destruction in the next fifty years.
- c) Without a doubt / It is widely believed that assertive writing is never / unlikely to be positively regarded by most / all readers.

**Academic Skills for Independent Learners**

Besides IndiWork, you are also strongly encouraged to join the *Academic Skills for Independent Learners* course. By completing the materials in that online course, you will be able to perform better in this subject's assessments. You can find a link to these materials on LEARN@PolyU.