Using Academic Language

The language used at university has various features which distinguish it from the language styles used in other contexts. Consider the language used in novels, conversation, newspapers or law courts. Each has its own style, with varying degrees of formality and objectivity. Academic language is:

* formal
* objective
* impersonal

These features ensure that ideas and arguments are communicated in a clear, convincing and professional manner.

Note: Writing conventions vary even within faculties, so it is best to ask your lecturer or tutor for the specific writing expectations of individual units.

Academic writing is formal

The tone used in academic writing is usually formal, meaning that it should not sound conversational or casual. You should particularly avoid colloquial, idiomatic, slang, or journalistic expressions in favor of precise vocabulary. Informal and colloquial language is often imprecise, so is open to misinterpretation, and can be inaccessible to non-native English speakers.

For example, ‘international business heavyweights’ is too informal. Better wording would be ‘leading international businesses’ if referring to corporations, or ‘international business leaders’ if referring to individuals.

Academic writing requires that you use full forms rather than contractions. For example, write ‘do not’ instead of ‘don't’, ‘it is’ instead of ‘it's’, ‘they have’ instead of ‘they've’ and ‘we will’ instead of ‘we'll’.

Academic writing is objective

In general, academic writing is objective. This means it is unbiased, based on facts and evidence and is not influenced by personal feelings. When personal beliefs or emotions influence our writing it is subjective and thus less convincing.

Academic writing is impersonal

Academic language is impersonal in that you generally don’t refer to yourself as the performer of actions. This involves avoiding the personal pronouns ‘I’ and ‘we’. For example, instead of writing ‘I will show’, you might write ‘this report will show’. The second person, ‘you’, is also to be avoided.

But: Writing conventions vary, even between units in the same faculty. Some styles of assessment tasks, such as reflective writing, require the use of personal pronouns. Therefore, it is always best to check the expectations of your specific lecturer or tutor.

Avoiding personal pronouns: If you need to avoid using the first or second person, in your writing, here are some ways of doing it:

Using passive voice:

‘We administered the questionnaire...’ (active voice)

‘The questionnaire was administered...’ (passive voice)

Using third person:

‘I discovered that…’ becomes ‘Research reveals that…’

‘We can see that….’ becomes ‘It is evident that…’

Making things rather than people the subject of sentences:

‘I show...’ becomes ‘The report shows...’

‘I interpret the results as...’ becomes ‘The results indicate...’

Test your understanding by completing the following quiz:

1) Read the following sentence from a student’s essay:

*Articles on women's sports were placed on the left page and often at the bottom, which is****a place skipped by many readers****.*

Check (✔) the two sentences below express the same idea using more formal language?

( ) Articles on women's sports were placed on the left page. often at the bottom, which is **an area often overlooked by readers**.

( ) Articles on women's sports were placed on the left page, often at the bottom, which is **a less prominent position.**

( ) Articles on women’s sports were placed on the left page, often at the bottom, which is **an area most readers jump over.**

2) Identify and underline seven instances of informal language in the text below.

*These results are really quite good. The model fits very well with the data points, as indicated by the R 2 values of 0.32 shown in Table 1 above. But the method used to obtain the best values for a, b, and c wasn't efficient as it involved putting lots of values into an Excel spreadsheet over and over to try and get the lowest R 2 value.*

Suggest an alternative: 1) \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ 2) \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ 3) \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ 4) \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

5) \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ 6) \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ 7) \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

3) Match the informal vocabulary in the list below with the more appropriate formal options underneath.

English often has more than one way to express an action. The choice is usually between a phrasal verb (often verb + preposition) and a single word. Phrasal verbs (e.g. give up, write down) are often used in conversation; however, in academic writing single verbs are used wherever possible.

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| --- |
| confirm, determine, verify / solve, repair, amend / demonstrate, indicate, illustrate /  revise, review / consider, monitor, analyze / satisfactory, positive, favorable /  somewhat, fairly, quite / commence, initiate, undertake / a great deal of, many, an abundance of |

Look at \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

Go over \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

Show \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

Begin \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

Good \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

A lot of \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

A bit \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

Fix \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

Make sure \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

Check \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

4) Identify and underline three instances of subjective wording in the text below.

These results are as we expected. The model fits very well with the data points, as indicated by the R 2 values of 0.32 shown in Table 1 above. However, the method used to obtain the best values for a, b, and c was frustrating as it involved spending long hours entering values into an Excel spreadsheet to obtain the lowest R 2 value.

Can you explain why they are subjective?

5)Another aspect of writing objectively is to avoid emotive language.

Read the passage below from a student's essay on the media and the representation of women's sport:

...Mikosa found similar results in her study for Womensport Australia, where she found that journalists discussed the female athletes' "elegance" or referred to women as "blonde girl(s)" and a journalist even wrote about one athlete's "domestic routine of cooking" (1998). With this in mind, I was absolutely appalled to hear an Australian television commentator’s reference to the women's Dutch hockey team when they won a bronze medal on the 29/9/2000. When the team stood on the dais to receive their medal, the male commentator’s sole comment was "Ahh look at the pretty little Dutch girls", without any mention whatsoever of their athleticism or sporting ability. It was a sad moment for Australian commentating and strengthens the arguments of Philips and Mikoza regarding the language the media uses to portray sports women and women's sport alike.

Identify and check (✔) the emotive words or phrases in the list below.

( ) without any mention whatsoever.

( ) sad moment.

( ) absolutely appalled.

( ) strengthens.

( ) domestic routine.

( ) Athleticism

( ) female athletes' "elegance"

6) These are some ways of limiting the use of ‘I’ and ‘we’ in academic writing. Consider changing the following sentences with the options given below.

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| --- |
| A standard graphical representation was used / the question of…was researched /  a survey of the literature revealed |

I surveyed the literature and discovered... \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

We used a standard graphical representation to... \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

We researched the question of... \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

7) The following sentences are written in an informal or subjective style. Choose an option from below to replace the bold text with formal and objective academic language.

i) **It’s so obvious** that people were given jobs just because they were male or female. I don’t think that is an acceptable approach and is even against the law. **Answer:\_\_**

|  |
| --- |
| a) I am outraged… b) It appears… c) It is ridiculous… |

ii) It’s so obvious that **people were given jobs** just because they were male or female. I don’t think that is an acceptable approach and is even against the law. **Answer:\_\_**

|  |
| --- |
| a) …people got jobs… b) …I got the job… c) …positions were assigned to people |

iii) It’s so obvious that people were given jobs **just because they were male or female**. I don’t think that is an acceptable approach and is even against the law. **Answer:\_\_**

|  |
| --- |
| a) …based on sex. b) …on the basis of gender. c) …just because of their looks |

Compiled from https://www.monash.edu/rlo/research-writing-assignments/writing/features-of-academic-writing/academic-language