

## Week 9 Self-learning materials

### Academic writing style 1

#### Objectivity

The goal of academic writing is to present and evaluate academic issues and to arrive at a position informed by research, **not to present one's own personal biases or preferences**. For this reason, personal pronouns, especially '*I*', '*You*' and '*We*' are often avoided. However, avoiding '*I*' does not mean you should merely report information. Your own evaluation of the material is extremely important, and can be made objective by the use of evidence or logical argumentation.

Look at the following examples and think how to make it more objective:

**You** never know how things will turn out.

No-one knows how things will turn out'.

Neither qualitative interviews nor focus groups are likely to **give you** easily quantifiable, factual or objective data.

Neither qualitative interviews nor focus groups are likely to **provide** easily quantifiable, factual or objective data.

As **you can see** from the data, two-thirds of respondents are satisfied with the current provision.

As **can be seen** from the data, two-thirds of respondents are satisfied with the current provision.

A more concise reformulation is:

The data **show that** two-thirds of respondents are satisfied with the current provision.

In order to put some distance between what you're writing and yourself as writer, to be cautious rather than assertive, you should:

avoid overuse of first person pronouns (I, we, my, our)

use impersonal subjects instead (It is believed that ..., it can be argued that ...)

use passive verbs to avoid stating the 'doer' (Tests have been conducted)

use verbs (often with it as subject) such as imagine, suggest, claim, suppose (It is supposed that...)

use ‘attitudinal signals’ such as apparently, arguably, ideally, strangely, unexpectedly.

avoid being too dogmatic and making sweeping generalizations.

consistently use evidence from your source reading to back up what you are saying.

avoid sexist language, such as chairman, mankind. Don’t refer to “the doctor” as he; instead, make the subject plural and refer to them as *they*. Avoid he/she, herself/himself etc.

These words allow you to hint at your attitude to something without using personal language.

use verbs such as would, could, may, might which ‘soften’ what you’re saying.

use qualifying adverbs such as some, several, a minority of, a few, many.

## Formality

Informal, everyday spoken English relies a lot on the situation and speakers to supply extra information that completes the message. For example:

For this experiment, twenty subjects will do.

Using formal, academic English we might write:

For the experiment to be viable, twenty subjects are sufficient.

In the first example, the meaning of ‘do’ is unclear. The meaning of the second example does not require interpretation or context to be understood, but has only one meaning.

## Contractions

Contractions (e.g. *don’t*, *won’t*, *can’t*) are **only** used in spoken contexts. Use full forms of the words.

If you use the ‘not + verb’ negative form, avoid contracted forms.

‘Verb + not’ contracted form	Preferred negative form
Sales didn’t increase despite the introduction of new targets.	Sales <b>did not</b> increase despite the introduction of new targets.
The conflict can’t be resolved without negotiation.	The conflict <b>cannot</b> be resolved without negotiation.

## 'Not + verb' negative forms

Avoid the 'not + verb' negative form if an alternative form is available.

Examples:

'Not + verb' negative	Preferred negative form
There isn't any evidence in support of this claim.	There is <b>no</b> evidence in support of this claim.
The new study doesn't support many of the initial findings.	The new study supports <b>few</b> of the initial findings.
There isn't much research on this topic.	There is <b>little</b> research on this topic.

## Rhetorical questions

Asking a question in a research report or essay evades your responsibility to provide specific information to your reader. Use indirect questions to specify more exactly the issue under study.

Compare the following.

The intervention has been underway for four years now. How successful has it been?

Given that the intervention has been underway for four years, it should be possible to measure its success.

## Unspecified categories

Expressions such as '*etc.*', '*and so on*', '*and so forth*', '*and that kind of thing*' place too much responsibility on your reader. Consider the following:

'...ribosomes, vacuoles, mitochondria *etc.*'

Only a biologist could add extra examples to the above list. So you should specify the category to help your reader. For example:

Tariffs, embargoes, and **other protectionist laws**...

Similes, metaphors, personification and **such literary devices**...

Use pre- and post-modifiers

In academic writing, most nouns are preceded or followed by one or more words or

phrases known as modifiers. In many cases, nouns have both pre-modifiers (occurring before the noun) and post-modifiers (occurring after the noun). Pre- and post-modification enables the writer to pack a lot of information into a limited number of words, thus making the style more concise. For example:

The unexpected **decline** in species that had previously thrived in the area was attributed to a sharp **rise** in temperature.

In this sentence, the nouns in bold, '**decline**' and '**rise**', have both pre- and post-modification.

### **Minimize the use of split infinitives**

Many writers think splitting infinitives violates a rule of grammar. Although we may say “to quickly run,” the preferred use in academic writing is to write “to run quickly.” Split infinitives are actually grammatically correct, but the general academic convention is to avoid them.

### **Do not end sentences with prepositions.**

Like the use of split infinitives, there is no historical or grammatical reason to avoid ending a sentence with a preposition. Nevertheless, many professors and publishers avoid doing so because of a pervasive belief that ending sentences with prepositions is incorrect.

### **Avoid capitalization**

Capitalization is appropriate only for specific, named, individual items or people. For example, capitalize school subjects only when you are referring to a specific course at a specific school: math is a general subject, but Math 301 is a particular course. Similarly: Department of Computer Sciences vs. a computer science department, the president vs. President Bush. **When in doubt, use lower case.**

### **American vs. British English**

Use whichever one of the spellings you are more comfortable with, as long as you keep it consistent throughout the document.